

LEARNING TO CHANGE

THE EXPERIENCE OF TRANSFORMING
EDUCATION IN SOUTH EAST EUROPE

edited by **Terrice Bassler**



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The Experience of Transforming Education in South East Europe

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Terrice Bassler



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Source: United Nations Cartographic Section, available at: <http://www.un.org/Depts/Cartographic/english/htmain.htm>, with modifications made by Communications Office, Open Society Institute - New York.

Preface

Whether as a student, a parent, a nongovernmental organization (NGO) activist, a teacher, a principal, a government official, or an academic expert, we are colleagues in transforming schools in South East Europe. Many genuine stories, as we have lived them in the past fifteen years, have not been written down. Only parts of the recent historic drama in “the Balkans” ever made it into the local or international media. The way educational improvement really happens—or fails to happen—is not easy to capture or to put into words.

We created this volume of many voices about education change to complement official reports and scholarly research. There are stacks of technical reports on the shelves of ministries of education and their international partners, including the World Bank, the OECD, the European Union (EU), United Nations agencies, bilateral aid agencies, and numerous international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Such papers assess a country’s education sector, give us “the numbers,” report on fact-finding trips, develop recommendations, justify policies, detail investments, and otherwise satisfy the requirements of bureaucracy and policymaking. They provide raw material for academics and analysts with an interest in South East Europe. Yes, they do play an important role. Official reports are compiled, however, with a certain detachment. And the analyses often don’t or can’t uncover the hardest truths about the school situation and its politics.

The context of education in South East Europe is diverse and full of contradictions. There are breakthroughs and occasional triumphs, such as a peace agreement or an election that heralds a better time, a national education reform process launched or legislation passed, a new project or program approved, a textbook or a training model delivered and well-received. There are twists and turns in the life of a ministry of education—or an entire government, for that matter. The projects, presence, and reception of international donor agencies vary from place to place. Nowadays in South East Europe, there is a clear view westward, toward EU membership, especially with the accession

of Slovenia to member status in 2004, and Romania and Bulgaria set to join in just a few years.

Still etched in minds, though, are the many setbacks, even catastrophes of the past fifteen years, especially during the 1990s. The fallout of communism, which other parts of the world also experienced, was compounded in South East Europe by the violent conflicts that flared in some republics of the former Yugoslavia. The schools, their pupils and teachers, always seem to bear the brunt of hard times. During sieges, social turmoil, or outright wartime, the schools may either stop operating or become places of oppression or resistance. Many school buildings housed soldiers and arms during the war in Bosnia. Governments sometimes use the schools as an expression or agent of ideology or nationalism, while communities and the school's professionals might struggle just to keep teaching and learning alive.

Schooling also reflected what was happening in society. A school's return to normal functioning after conflict was a signal to those who had left that it might be all right to go home again. Immigrants arrived over the years in places like Croatia, Montenegro, Serbia, and Slovenia. How "the other" children from outside towns and villages and from minority ethnic groups were integrated—or not—into classrooms of these receiving communities revealed the true colors of tolerance. In Kosova, ethnic Albanians organized home-based classrooms as a symbol of their resistance to the Milošević regime. In 1999, when this same Kosovar population fled to Macedonia and Albania, the makeshift classrooms sprang up again in the tents of their refugee camps.

In recent, less conflict-battered years in the former Yugoslavia and in countries of the region less directly affected by violent conflict and dislocation, like Romania and Bulgaria, the education systems may suffer in other ways. There may be the strain and collapse of public budgets, periodic strikes by teachers and students, inequity in education stemming from decentralization or discrimination, and political purges of administrators and principals. All of these situations test the wills of people engaged in trying to make schools better.

This book was organized through the Open Society Institute's (OSI) network of foundations, local education NGOs, school-based partners, and many formal and informal alliances of visionaries and change agents throughout South East Europe. OSI was founded by the Hungarian-born philanthropist George Soros. The OSI network and its initiatives formed an archipelago of sanity for many people in the Balkans during the worst

years of the 1990s, when Soros extended his philanthropy into the region. Education that models and contributes to an open society has constituted an important goal of Soros's efforts in South East Europe and elsewhere in the world.

A group from OSI first gathered to envision the book at a workshop in Montenegro in mid-2003. Participants came from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosova, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia. Later the stories emerged and became available for review on a website to which the contributors shared access. Authors received support from critical friends, both local and "virtual." Two more workshops, one in Sarajevo later in 2003 and another in Durres, Albania, in the spring of 2004, reassembled the book team to check progress, to nudge the stories along in quality and clarity, and to encourage one another.

The result of our effort is a collection of eleven stories of change from nine different countries or territories of the region. All of the authors were born and raised in South East Europe, except one, who is American-born but has worked and lived in corners of South East Europe for more than a decade. As storytellers, we tried to give voice to many real-life characters. The authors are responsible for the contents and the views expressed explicitly or otherwise. Though there are no fictional elements in the telling, several authors have chosen to change the names of individuals described and quoted.

For those readers who are less familiar with the country contexts described in the stories, we have included annexes with basic data for each country or territory and chronologies that describe the evolution of education systems over the past fifteen years. There is also a list of key references for those interested in learning more. We urge you to consult the multilingual e-library of the South East European Educational Cooperation Network, <http://www.see-educoop.net>, which is another excellent source of information.

An introductory chapter distils messages and recurring themes from the stories. It is brief and intentionally refrains from overinterpreting the stories and their perspectives. To us, the voices should speak for themselves.

The Authors and Editor

About the Authors

Terrice Bassler (Editor) is an American-born education development specialist with twenty years of experience spanning Europe, Africa, and China for both the World Bank and the Open Society Institute. She has worked to strengthen schooling and cross-border cooperation in South East Europe since 1992 and directs a regional education office of the Open Society Institute in Ljubljana, Slovenia. She is a visiting fellow at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Alexandru Crișan (Romania) is currently the executive president of Center Education 2000+, an independent education policy think-tank that offers educational services and consultancy in Romania and abroad. Crișan writes and lectures widely on education topics, especially curriculum and teacher training reform, and is a consultant to the World Bank, UN, UNDP, UNESCO, OECD, and OSI with experience in South and Central Asia, the former Soviet Union, and South East Europe.

Božena Jelušić (Montenegro) has been teaching literature for over two decades. She publishes papers in various fields of literary theory as well as literary criticism. She has collaborated with her husband, a sociologist, on diverse projects in sociology, coauthoring many of the papers. She is actively involved in the NGO sector. She has three children and lives in Budva, Montenegro.

Petya Kabakchieva (Bulgaria) is an associate professor at the Department of Sociology, Sofia University, St. Kliment Ohridski, and a member of the Board of the Open Society Institute–Sofia since 2003. Her job is her hobby. She has conducted considerable research in the social sphere, including education, and it has never tired her.

Medina Korda (Bosnia and Herzegovina) joined the education program of the Open Society Fund–Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2003, following her return from postgraduate studies at Duke University in the United

States. On her second day of work, she learned that she would be writing a story about education change in that country. The story included here is her first attempt ever to write a narrative.

Ivan Lorenčič (Slovenia) is the headmaster of the Second Gymnasium High School in Maribor, a position to which he was appointed in 1982 at the age of thirty. The gymnasium, the first school in the region to offer the international baccalaureate, is well-known for its extracurricular programs, including a renowned theatre company and school orchestra. The school offers scholarships to promising students from other parts of the former Yugoslavia. As director of Slovenia's national Board of Education from 1993 to 2000, Lorenčič contributed to major reforms in the school system and remains active on numerous committees and councils.

Vigor Majić (Serbia) is director of the Petnica Science Center in Valjevo, Serbia. For many years, he has been interested in educational development, especially in science education, the education of gifted young people, and the improvement of teaching methods and technology. He has published numerous articles and studies.

Bardhyl Musai (Albania) is an associate professor and director of the Center for Democratic Education in Tirana. He lectures on educational psychology, curriculum design and instruction and teaching models, graduate and postgraduate courses, at the University of Tirana and the University of South East Europe in Tetovo, Macedonia. His published papers and books focus on teacher education, teaching methods, and curriculum from the standpoint of democracy in education.

Refika Mustafić (Serbia) was born in 1970 in Niš, Serbia. She is a teacher of Serbian language and literature. In 1999, she founded the Roma Education Centre and has been fighting ever since for a better and more intellectual identity for the Roma.

Dukagjin Pupovci (Kosova) is the executive director of the Kosova Education Centre (KEC), the most prominent nongovernmental organization active in the field of education in Kosova. He is also a professor of applied mathematics and computer science at the University of Prishtina.

Tomislav Reškovac (Croatia) has been teaching philosophy for fifteen years and coaching students in debate for a decade. He is currently a

teacher of philosophy at *Privatna klasična gimnazija*, an independent alternative school in Zagreb.

Lindita Tahiri (Kosova), former higher education program manager at the Kosova Foundation for Open Society and the Kosova Education Centre, is now the coordinator of the Kosovo Tempus Office for higher education development. She has been teaching English at the University of Prishtina for more than ten years and has published two collections of poetry, as well as Albanian translations of American and English authors.

Acknowledgments

This book is like a well-used primary school text. It bears the fingerprints and scratches of many who opened and closed it, read and discussed it, internalized it, or even tore out a few of its pages. Beyond just the authors, many of those involved in the book's creation carried the project forth to work in the morning and back home again at night.

Thanks are owed to those who made a great difference to the integrity of the book and the history of its making. We acknowledge the Foundation Open Society Institute–Representative Office Montenegro, Open Society Fund–Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Open Society Foundation for Albania for hosting the regional gatherings and reading sessions that always seemed to push the book to the next level of quality. Teja Rek succeeded in e-organizing us all and keeping the story drafts and deadlines moving on our website. Zdravko Miović was the facilitator who helped draw out our vision for the book.

At the Open Society Institute in New York, Laura Silber helped make sure we had a book and Ari Korpivaara made sure it was readable. They sponsored the invaluable help of our most critical friend, Chuck Sudetic, who pushed us to see the drama in education stories, and to show it, not tell it. Chuck's edits reminded us not to be too sentimental about the journey and he liberated a narrator or two to become heroes of their own tales.

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In **Bulgaria**, the two stories could not have come to life without their main heroes. In “Out of the Tunnel,” these are Stella Kostova, her colleagues Julian and Nicky, and all the people from Sliven’s Romani neighborhood with whom the author met. Raicho Pojarliev assisted the research in Sliven. In “No Need to Hurry Up?” we appreciate the role of Georgi Simidchiev and Nina Georgieva. Georgi Dimitrov, an enthusiastic proponent of reform, helped sensitize the author to education issues. Thanks are also extended to supporters from the Open Society Institute–Sofia, particularly Neda Kristanova, who was the coplayer in rewriting, Raina Gavrilova, Stefan Popov, and Irena Alexieva for her translation into English of both stories.

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in-depth discussions that identified the essentials of a complex time in history. Thanks go to Crina Moşneagu for her technical and logistical support, as well as to Ana Maria Baciú for a translation that captures the spirit of the original text.

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Patterns, Paradoxes, and Puzzles of Education Change in South East Europe

The stories in this volume speak about education change in South East Europe from many perspectives. There are personal, social, technical, national, and global dimensions to what is described. The storytellers may be keen observers of change or change agents themselves. They explore how schooling may have changed or not in their home countries, in the contexts they know best. Many authors reveal how the process has affected them as professionals and as human beings. What unites all of the stories are people who allowed themselves to question the status quo and venture in new directions, moving into zones of discomfort. The stories are told with the wisdom and harsh light of hindsight.

The progress illustrated by the stories varies in pace and process from one part of the region to another. Major change in an education system is hardly ever linear. There are many zigzags and spirals and sometimes sharp turns back to the past. Nevertheless, the stories both reveal and confirm recurring phenomena in education change throughout South East Europe.

A new agenda for education in the region has taken shape over the last fifteen years of transition from communism. Where many once considered education the rightful “guardian of tradition,” as described in a story from Bulgaria, there are now healthy professional and popular debates throughout South East Europe about what constitutes quality in teaching and learning and how education needs to be changed to provide it. Curricula, textbooks, teaching methods, and the entire system of schooling have all come under critical scrutiny. Education policymakers in South East Europe—and societies at large—are nowadays much more engaged with European and global debates about educational transformation. More than half of the countries in the region have launched major national reform processes in the last ten years. Stories included here from

Romania and Montenegro chronicle the evolution of two of these years-long national reform efforts. In a story from Croatia, a teacher and several students learn from their extracurricular school activities what needs to change inside a system that has seen little systemic change.

Education and its systemic reform in South East Europe gained wider prominence after the end of the Kosova conflict in 1999. In June of that year, eight national governments of states in the region signed a Stability Pact for Peace and Economic Development in the Balkans. They were joined by governments in Western Europe, North America, and Asia and by the major international organizations. The education sector was nowhere mentioned as a priority in the text of the Stability Pact. An advocacy network of individuals, public policy institutes, and active donors lobbied successfully to put education on this agenda.

A network for educational cooperation in South East Europe, started by the Austrian government during its presidency of the European Union in 1998 and known as the Graz Process, was designated to promote the role of education in development under the Stability Pact. Five years later, it is debatable whether the Stability Pact itself had a deep impact on education systems in South East Europe or on increasing foreign or national investment in them. Nevertheless, many of the cross-border links to which it gave impetus and resources are still operating some time after the early donor funds dried up.

Following the Stability Pact launch and the ousting of Milošević as president of Yugoslavia a year later in October 2000, several major multilateral actors in education reform in Europe expanded their support in South East Europe. Organizations like the World Bank, OECD, the European Union, and the Council of Europe became more involved in education policy dialogue and investment on the ground in Serbia, Kosova, and Montenegro. In previous years, international cooperation on education in these places had been limited mainly to humanitarian assistance that helped schools cope or recover from wartime and some grassroots education initiatives organized by NGOs.

There is now an increasing focus on minority rights in education in South East Europe. Two stories in this volume, from Bulgaria and Serbia, offer vivid descriptions of what life is like for a Romani child living in the ghetto and a Romani pupil attending a mainstream school with the majority population. In neither case is quality education a reality, nor is desegregation and integration necessarily a positive experience. Minority rights in language of instruction, textbook provision, and examinations

are also on the new education agenda. Perhaps the most significant pressure for ensuring rights comes from the fact that political leaders in most countries of South East Europe aspire to membership in the European Union; so far only Slovenia has made it, in 2004. Conditions affirming minority rights are the principal binding requirement on education systems as far as European Union accession is concerned.

History in South East Europe has shown that issues of diversity in schooling cannot be ignored or swept under the carpet for long. Ministries of education that turn a blind eye on the existence of minority ethnic groups or, worse yet, institutionalize discrimination at the school level do so at their peril. Discriminatory government schooling policies in Kosova against ethnic Albanians under Milošević and in Macedonia during the 1990s contributed to social tension that sometimes brought violent conflict. The Ohrid Agreement of 2001, which was intended to resolve inter-ethnic conflict in Macedonia, focused on righting the wrongs in education.

Democratic process in education is also high on the agenda, though progress is neither swift nor straightforward. A large gap still exists between the rhetoric of democracy and the reality of behavior inherited from a past in which the authority of the school leader and teacher was rarely questioned. Nevertheless, there are breakthroughs. The culture of school management is changing step by step. Through extensive teacher and school leadership training and a conscious change in incentives, a new breed of school-based professional is emerging in many countries. The professional development described by the storytellers from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, and Slovenia offers a glimpse into the transformation that is taking place.

A great deal of education reform energy has focused on examinations, notably the revision of the secondary school final examination, known in many countries as the *matura*. The revamping of this exam, which can influence what is taught and learned in schools more profoundly than a curriculum or textbook, is highly controversial and sensitive. The tensions surrounding the introduction of a new exam can drive students and parents into the streets in mass protest. Two stories, from Slovenia and Bulgaria, illustrate all that must go right or all that can go wrong in the management of change in this area.

A striking development in the landscape of education is the springing up of civil society. Under communism, nongovernmental organizations in any sector, let alone in education, did not exist or were illegal. Now, in

almost all countries, there is an NGO sphere active in teacher and administrator training, producing alternative educational materials, facilitating public dialogue about education, and, increasingly, monitoring governmental policy decisions and reform implementation. Many of these NGOs have grown out of the Open Society Institute network or through donor-funded projects. This NGO sector is home to a growing number of well-trained education specialists. In recent years, it has become more common for international agencies to recruit specialists from this sector for work elsewhere in the world. Specialists from Slovenia and Romania, which experienced significant education reforms in the 1990s, are especially active in education development outside their countries.

Contrary to the outside world's perceptions of hostility and divisions in the Balkan countries, cooperation on education is possible and, in fact, quite strong. In the former Yugoslavia, where there was a shared language and similar structures in education among the republics, informal relationships across borders remain vital. More extensive, regionwide networks have mushroomed in recent years among students, teachers, schools, policymakers, and education ministries.

The formation of the South East European Educational Cooperation Network (SEE-ECN) in 2000 was an important step forward in the establishment of networking as an institution in itself. The SEE-ECN, with the Center for Education Policy Studies at the University in Ljubljana as a hub, has established "country nodes" in education organizations throughout South East Europe. The network's board consists of people from the region with experience in education change. Its website, <http://www.see-educoop.net>, and newsletter are the main information sources on education in South East Europe. The network also organizes periodic trainings and exchanges.

At the regional gatherings of the team that created this book and reviewed the stories, discussion about change returned again and again to these questions: What is crucial to education change? What do the stories show us? On what factors does education reform hinge? What is specific to the education change process in this region?

An emerging consensus, confirmed in the stories, is that the outcomes of education change initiatives in South East Europe depend most on people and politics.

The People

In South East Europe, it is more often people who achieve the greatest strides in change—rather than institutions or programs *per se*. The role of individual leadership is critical in schools, ministries, and nongovernmental organizations working in education. The most successful leaders mobilize resources and tap relationships well beyond those available by virtue of their formal roles. Change in the current contexts in the region may also be affected by the presence of strong individuals and weak or missing institutions.

Catalysts to education change appear in various forms. “Positive viruses” that spread into wider change might emerge from an individual’s leadership, a consultative process, a revealing report or study, or an innovative teaching model. Conflict, scandals, and media reportage might also be catalysts. The productive tension that is developing among the schools, the independent, nongovernmental sector, and central education institutions can be catalysts as well.

The ownership and momentum of education change efforts seem to depend on stakeholders—especially teachers, but also parents, students, principals, academics, and others—who seize opportunities to create, decide, and act. Sometimes, the momentum for change proceeds without clarity or consensus on a vision. The stories from Romania and Montenegro and the saga of examination reform in Bulgaria illustrate how change processes play out under such circumstances. Ensuring the authenticity of public dialogue and stakeholder involvement may cost dearly in time, but the payoff is substantial in the long run. In the past, arbitrary decrees, official bulletins, or announcements in the media about changes in education might have been acceptable and undisputed, even obeyed. Nowadays, this kind of closed decision-making on change is less and less tolerated.

Deeply engrained in the cultures of South East Europe are the forging and shifting of alliances and the use of such connections to get things done in the face of inept, inefficient, or corrupt bureaucracies. Alliances and networks can be both a blessing and a curse. Successful education change hinges on the strength and reliability of informal or formal networks. The story of a pragmatic physics teacher from Serbia illuminates the delicate balance of such human networks. Change efforts also may be sabotaged, undone, diverted, or blocked through the use of open and hidden networks. Paying attention to these forms of organization is often

more crucial to change in South East Europe than mapping who sits where in institutional boxes.

The Politics

Politics and education in South East Europe are inextricably linked. A national reform in education cannot happen without sustained political will, no matter how much national or donor investment is poured into it. Change at all levels of the education system can be fuelled or blocked by politics. In several countries, it is still possible for central officials to hire and fire school-level workers at will, which politicizes the education professions and frustrates development efforts.

Large-scale top-down education reform efforts are guaranteed to fail unless they are balanced by bottom-up activity and implementation at the school level. A vivid illustration is provided by the story from Slovenia, in which the government introduces testing of students on their ability to organize scientific experiments without taking into account that laboratory equipment is unavailable in many schools. Likewise, grassroots initiatives and isolated models for change will fail to affect the wider system unless they obtain top-level support for integration into mainstream policy and practice.

In an education system that is in flux or in stasis, it is crucial to consider where the school is positioned politically. Is it a locus for change? Resistance to change? Inertia? Innovation? Is the position itself changing? Is it accountable to the state, the community, or both? The years-long story of the life of the Simin Han School in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the dramatic story of school and community in Albania during reconstruction remind us that understanding the micro-politics of education change is essential.

The politics of resources is also a crucial aspect of education change. Keeping schools functional, upgrading run-down or war-damaged school buildings, ensuring textbook provision, and making sure teachers receive salaries are all priorities. In many countries, the hoped-for economic development and donor assistance have not materialized. Maintenance budgets are down to the bare bones. It is not unusual for schools to operate with shortened class periods and in multiple shifts. School attendance and “time on task” teaching and learning are compromised when the material base is neglected.

And the Paradoxes

The stories in this book may generate more contradictions about education change than they provide absolute answers and formulae for how to do it. Intended or not, the storytellers help make us aware of paradoxes:

Conflict, real and unreal, resolved or unresolved

It is true that schooling and possibilities for change are deeply affected by the violent social conflicts of the last decade and a much longer and deeper history of conflict in the region. It is also true that much improvement and cooperation is possible, despite conflict and presumed animosities. The culture of informal human connections and dialogue remains strong, although it is sometimes difficult to cultivate formal participatory and democratic processes in the interest of education improvement. Stereotyping and biases that underpin conflict are very much present and operating in teaching and learning and the overall management of education.

It is widely perceived outside the region that the most intense violence in the Balkans has been “resolved” by treaties. However, many citizens in Kosova, in the Republic of Srpska within Bosnia and Herzegovina, or in Montenegro see a situation that has yet to be resolved. The management of education systems in Kosova and Bosnia and Herzegovina has been heavily subject to influence and interference—some would describe it as occupation—by international organizations designated as responsible for education.

The not-so-solid base of the education systems

Clearing away the rhetoric about strong educational traditions and the high quality of students emerging from the systems in the region (both accurate to some extent), we find many alarming trends in the school systems of South East Europe. The teaching forces are often poorly paid and lack motivation, making it difficult to attract young talent into the profession. Many teachers and principals live multiple lives, holding extra jobs, running small businesses, or tutoring on the side to supplement salaries. Once-active and interested donors are leaving the region for the newer “hot spots” and more impoverished places elsewhere in the world. The local economies are not always able to pick up where donors left off in financing or maintaining infrastructure improvements. Schools are decrepit in many places, way below Western European standards.

The initial results of participation of several South East European countries in international educational assessments such as PISA, TIMSS, and PIRLS are raising concern about the depth and breadth of quality learning in the schooling systems. One visible sign of a lack of confidence in the quality of the current systems is the trend of elected leaders in South East Europe to enroll their own children in the many new private schools being set up, thus forsaking the troubled public school system even as they promote and celebrate the state's reform efforts.

Change when you think nothing is happening

Look again. You might be surprised at what is going on when it is assumed that an education system in South East Europe has collapsed or become moribund. There might also be important change activities happening outside the official curriculum and the regular school hours. Human resilience and the imperative of daily life are powerful forces. Stories of Romani activism in Serbia, the introduction of debate clubs in Croatia, and the revitalization of a school in Bosnia and Herzegovina during wartime all embody the powerful lesson that much is possible even when everything appears impossible.

Change that brings discontinuity, not "concrete" change

A hard truth is that the first steps of change for the better often involve painful discontinuity. Borders and jurisdictions, sovereignty, leaders, laws, policies, staffing appointments, and even definitions of learning have all been subject to enormous upheaval, even turmoil, in South East Europe. The stories of a parent from Kosova and a sociologist from Bulgaria invite the reader into the sense of groundlessness that can result in such circumstances.

Unintended consequences of advocacy for change

There are plenty of well-intentioned experiments and well-meaning advocates for change, especially in the schools and flourishing sector of education NGOs in the region. However, as the story from Romania shows, these initiatives may have unintended consequences. Innovations in teaching might fuel resistance, jealousy, or obstacles. Openness and transparency of information and decision making or of media coverage in education, if felt by some to be unsafe, might result in the creation and tightening of circles. Education might become "an unapproachable fortress" of nonchange, as the storyteller from Bulgaria terms it. Advocates

of educational models and innovations, unfortunately, can become competitive or confused in their work instead of coexisting around shared values for education change.

Higher education behind the curve of change

It is assumed in many countries that the experts in universities and teacher training institutes or colleges will lead the way in education reform in schools. This assumption still operates in institutional processes such as curriculum revision and textbook selection. The truth is not so simple. In many parts of South East Europe, the academic experts lag behind the innovations and the advocacy for change, rather than lead it. In the worst of cases, they wilfully obstruct change for the sake of the status quo and vested interests. Many faculties of pedagogy are little connected with school reality, let alone with up-to-date education policy studies. The vanguard for change in classroom teaching and learning in South East Europe can be found in the schools and NGO sector.

Relevance and irrelevance of donors, international organizations

External donor investment and presence has undoubtedly been a factor in education change in South East Europe over the past decade or so. Initially, most of the effort was humanitarian, with a view toward relief in the short term, rather than structural change for the longer term. Donors descended in droves upon Bosnia and Herzegovina and later Kosova during the conflicts in those countries and gave invaluable material support to their schools. The sanctions on Yugoslavia (Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosova) during the 1990s prevented much foreign investment in the education system. By the year 2000, however, there was significant activity by the major donors throughout the region on developing and creating institutions for holistic system change in education.

It is not easy to characterize the relevance and impact of this work. Perhaps it is too early. The presence of donors and donor-led projects is woven into several of the stories. Yet in others, their role and mission seem like some mirage that bears little relevance to the daily reality the storyteller is describing. Perhaps this is a message that perceptions of influence and impact can be overblown into a comfortable virtual reality.

The status of Roma in the region

Many things are paradoxical about the Romani minority in South East Europe. Roma are deeply interconnected with the national contexts, histo-

ries, and cultures of the region, yet they are everywhere separated from it. The region is sometimes divided against itself, yet united in its prejudice against Roma—a prejudice that takes a variety of forms. Despite a determination not to recreate any more ghettos in this book, two stories do single out Roma and education for special attention.

Roma historically have been excluded from much of public and civil life. The results are everywhere the same—poverty, degradation, and broken dreams. The variety of “special solutions” employed for what is generally regarded as the “Roma problem” include sending Romani children to “special schools” for mentally challenged children, or placing them in segregated classes in regular schools, or keeping them in ghetto schools. There are “special curricula” for Roma, “special teachers,” and always there is “special treatment.” In some schools, Romani children have to wash before they can go near other children. In other schools, they must use a separate entrance to come and go. In all schools, Romani children are victimized by the lower expectations of teachers and administrators.

Data describing the education of Romani children most often show low enrollments, high dropout rates, low achievement, high failure, low parental engagement, or high teacher dissatisfaction. It is far from certain that any of these data are accurate. It is impossible to find reliable general statistics on Roma and usable data are scant. Estimates abound, but these vary greatly and make it risky to draw comparisons among countries. Nevertheless, the final section of the book provides a page of data on the size of the Romani population in each country, school enrollments, and university attendance. The information provides a rough picture that readers are advised to regard with caution.

Civil society sometimes more stable than state institutions

As the new democracies in the region flex their muscles in one election after another, education change may be a casualty. The average life span of an education minister in South East Europe, at present, is only a couple of years. Many elections result in a coalition government. The position of education minister often goes to a minor party in the coalition, which uses it to advance the party platform. The political appointments carry clout, though, in bureaucracies where many key decisions are still made at the center. A change of minister and top-level officials can sidetrack or turn back an education reform process or marginalize individuals associated with change. Ironically, many NGOs and civil society organizations

are the places from which reform-oriented government leaders may be recruited or to which they may retreat after a stint in central institutions. Thus, in many ways, civil society may be more “stable” and sustained in commitment to improving education than state institutions.

* * *

“Many challenges remain” is a tired cliché in education in South East Europe. Of course, it is also true, and the stories both hint and point to what lies ahead. Some of the most interesting puzzles reveal themselves in questions.

Why and for how long must education be at the mercy of turbulent political winds of fortune or uncertainty in so many parts of the region? How can sufficient conditions of political will and stability be reached and maintained so that long-term education change processes keep moving? How will the education systems of South East Europe fare in the European Union accession process?

Will the situation with regard to minority rights in education improve or deteriorate? Will the situation for Romani children in the region become better? Will the influences of nationalism in education increase or dissipate in the region as a whole, or will there be great differences among countries? What factors will influence this process and the various contexts?

How can scarce resources be used most wisely? Will education receive “its share” of the returns of investments in economic development? When will the material base of South East Europe be on a par with other parts of Europe? Are the donors’ loans and grants having a real impact on the everyday life in a school? Can donor resources be better directed?

Is it possible to accelerate the development of training and research institutions linked to education policy and practice? How, and to what end?

Perhaps, the voices and insights in this book offer some clues as to how the many pieces of the education puzzle can all fit together.

Simin Han

By Medina Korda, Bosnia and Herzegovina

My wintery day visiting the Simin Han Primary School begins, reasonably enough, with the morning school bell. Nothing looks or sounds unusual. The morning bell clangs. Children's voices and laughter resonate down the halls. School bags waddle up the stairs. Posters shout from the walls. But before the bell signals the end of classes that afternoon, the stories of the Simin Han Primary School carry me through six lives of sweat and inspiration, and ten years of filling chairs, overcoming trauma and restraints, and forging the kinds of bonds that make a community.

The Simin Han Primary School had been churning out kids for more than fifty years before the 15th of July, 1992, when the war snuffed out its first life. A contingent of troops from the Army of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina took over the empty building, three floors of worn, standard-Balkan stucco and brick. Situated a few kilometers east of the industrial city of Tuzla, Simin Han had been an ethnically mixed community, a big village where everyone—mostly Serb, Muslim, Croat, but a few members of other ethnic groups, and, of course, every possible combination—knew one another. By the spring of 1993, that Simin Han was gone. The front line lurked nearby.

During March, then April, then May, thousands of Muslim refugees from eastern Bosnia arrived. They came packed aboard white United Nations trucks: elderly women in shawls and pantaloons, peasant matrons, young wives, teenage girls, and flocks of kids, all wearing worn-out shoes and smelling of filth, woodsmoke, and fear. (Their husbands, fathers, and sons were still trapped in eastern parts of the country.) The women and children occupied any place they could around Tuzla. In Simin Han they found houses and apartments that Serb families had abandoned. The kids ran wild around their mothers. Their pots of boiling

beans steamed up the windows. On bright days, their laundry hung from lines and their bedding sunned itself on bushes and fence posts.

Osman

An eerie quiet hung over Simin Han on the morning that Osman—six feet, four inches and skinny, someone who would look like a stick-figure in any army uniform—rode in from Tuzla with orders to report to a family house and take up a new assignment. Simin Han was at the end of the world, it seemed in 1993, and gasoline was almost impossible to come by. So Osman was riding in on his daughter's bicycle. The road was deserted. The girl's bike squeaked and rolled through an emptiness of abandoned fields and gutted, windowless houses. Bullets and shrapnel had pocked some of the walls. Tree branches littered the way, and mortar rounds had carved splash patterns into the asphalt. Osman pedaled nervously. Anyone would have. Dull thuds sounded over the horizon. Gunfire rattled in the distance. And in an instant, it seemed, Osman himself had come under attack. An explosion, an ear-ripping bang, upended his bicycle. Osman found himself on the ground, shaken.

"Goddammit." A tube had blown, the tire was flat. Osman pulled his gangly body to its feet, righted the bicycle, and began to push. The flaccid rubber seemed to mock each of his steps for the next hour. It should have been a twenty-minute ride.

Osman grew anxious as he parked the bike in front of the house in Simin Han where he had been ordered to report for duty. It was spacious for a house, but Osman knew immediately that it would not be spacious enough. There were other problems. A detonation or mortar impact had poked a hole in its roof. Blankets were hanging over its bare window frames. And there was one more problem Osman didn't see until after he had entered the front door and assumed his new assignment as the principal of the primary school in Simin Han: he sat down for his first teachers' meeting in a room with no chairs.

The conversation strayed from the usual topics of curriculum, discipline, and teaching methods. All Osman and the teachers talked about that day was how to get the Simin Han Primary School out of the house and back into the school building. A thousand soldiers were living in the building then. They filled the place with the paraphernalia of an army. Guns, boxes, cots, junk, all olive green and dirty. The meeting tables

were in the lobby. The classrooms had become bunk rooms. The chairs, desks, and other school furniture and documents had been consigned to the basement. The empty windows were covered with standard-issue UNHCR white plastic sheets. Smoke and dust and handprints stained the walls a dingy gray. It was cold.

Osman and the teachers had few options. One was to stay in the house-school. Another was to move into a second building across from the school-barracks. The only solution that promised to leave enough room for the pupils, however, was to force the army out of the school building.

Osman started negotiating with the commander to withdraw. Day after day, without a break. The commander gave the same arguments: the war and the army were the priority. But Osman kept knocking on the commander's door. He knew the commander well. For the commander was also his commander. Eventually they cut a deal. The school and army: fifty-fifty.

A pile of shells and mortar rounds and other explosives stood in one of the rooms in the basement when the teachers started arranging the classrooms. The teachers asked parents and the soldiers to help clear space, to cover the broken windows with plastic, to rehang the doors, clean up the trash, and find coal for heating.

The Simin Han Primary School attracted more than one hundred pupils soon after it opened its doors in September 1993. But there were many parents who did not want to send their children to school. These parents had other priorities. Finding food. Collecting wood and coal for heat. Locating better shelter. Parents also did not want to send their children to school because they thought the enemy would not hesitate to target a place filled with children. This was no irrational fear; mortar rounds hit many schools during the war in Bosnia, including classrooms crowded with children. In Simin Han, the barracks made the school building a legitimate target. Soldiers were sitting in the lobby together with school-children, the fighting men shouldering their guns, the kids shouldering their school bags.

Osman and the teachers spent the entire month of November 1993 discussing one issue—how to attract more children to school. They decided to visit the parents of every child in the village, and they began with the families living nearest the school in the early spring of 1994. They kept going, spreading out farther and farther from the school building, and every step farther meant more children in the school. It meant less

space for them and more working shifts for teachers. In just a couple of weeks—somewhere around the end of April of 1994—the school had about seven hundred children. Osman knew that for the next school year, 1994–95, there would be more than a thousand.

“In September of 1994, we still shared our school with the army, and there was not enough space for all of us,” says Osman in a muffled voice, reaching for his cigarettes.

His armchair is empty. He is seated at a meeting table. He tries to cross his legs under the table, but they are too long to fit underneath. I look at mine. They fit nicely.

“We began working in three shifts in our half of the building. A few teachers from the community joined us, the mathematics teacher, the physics teachers, and a few recent graduates. Everything was going well in the beginning. I would come to the school from the front line, delegate what needed to be done to the teachers, and go back again to the front line. I thought that things could go on like this for a while, but in less than a month of work, teachers started to complain. They could no longer work in three shifts every day.”

The schedule was too taxing. The days too long, the time too short for the teachers to do all they needed to do to live. The only option, they realized, was to try to force the army out of the school. Again, talks with the commander started and it was, it seemed at the time, impossible to reach an agreement no matter what Osman said.

During dangerous days—somehow, with little uncertainty, one was able to distinguish these during the war—kids did not go to school. A cold day in January 1995 was one of those days. A shell exploded in the school. Walls were ruined. The room where weapons were stored was littered with smashed chairs and plaster dust. The glass covering the entrance—the only glass left in the school—was shattered. Soldiers gathered around. Some of them started to clean up the mess; some of them just stood there; others went upstairs to see whether there were any children wounded.

“There are no children in the school,” a soldier shouted in a trembling voice. The commander looked around, silent, perhaps scared. A soldier who had mishandled the weapons had been killed. The commander sat down in the middle of that room, looked at his men, and tried to fathom what happened. He looked angry and helpless.

In less than two weeks, at the end of January 1995, the commander and soldiers moved out. The school was fully operational by the end of

February. The teachers worked in two shifts. The children occupied all the chairs in regular classrooms. Now there were 1,200 of them. The teachers and administrators produced a school development plan. Everything was in place.

"This is just a façade. Two-thirds of our children do not have one or both parents. Those who are here with children are unemployed. They are poor, and a number of them never attended or finished school." Osman said this in the hall to the teachers on a cold day in February 1995. Teachers nodded approvingly, kept quiet for a few seconds, and then the noise overtook the principal's room as they entered it. Osman and the teachers filled his office and discussed ways to make the lives of these people at least bearable. Ideas, plans were floating around the table. Officials from the Ministry of Education and the Institute of Pedagogy were silent, perhaps afraid to say anything as Osman talked about these problems. They did not dare to promise anything, because they knew that there was not much that could be done when it came to employment or better living standards.

"What we can do is to provide them with opportunities for schooling. We can fill these chairs at night with adults," Osman said. Everyone looked at each other. Meeting after meeting took place. How to begin the school for adults, how to convince adults to come to school, how to work with them—these were issues they tried to resolve. In other schools Osman knew about, learning was not the priority. Parents would go to school a few times, and soon afterward receive worthless diplomas.

Osman and the teachers were going to make sure everyone who came to the school was given a full opportunity to learn something. This is what they all decided. Not long after this meeting, the teachers and Osman found themselves facing adult students with many different needs. Many adults had never gone to school. The rare parents who had been working without education for years suddenly found themselves facing layoffs unless they finished primary school. Some of the adults wanted to finish the schooling they had begun many years before.

Over a period of several months, together with the Institute of Pedagogy, the teachers and the principal created a flexible curriculum for the adult learner. Everyone agreed to give the teachers a free hand. They did not know how this was going to function in the real world—this teaching at night of parent-learners. But teachers approached adults as individuals. They developed different methods of teaching, made it interesting. They

abandoned the traditional principles of: I talk, you listen; you produce, I evaluate; the same story repeated over and over.

Hava

More than 400 adults have finished the primary school program since it began during the war. It brought the community into the school, and carried the school into the community. It helped some of the parents find jobs.

I look at Osman who is reaching for his notebook. The noise of the hallway starts spilling into his office. It is already 10:30 and the school bell clangs again. The door opens and a woman enters the room. Osman shakes her hand, looks at me, and gestures to speak with her.

“My name is Hava Muratović and I am a refugee from a village near Bratunac,” the woman says as she sits down in the principal’s chair. Hava is in her mid-thirties. The frown lines above her eyes are deep. They deepen more as she talks about her life, about her loss. It was 1992; they had heard rumors that their village was no longer safe. The mortar explosions in the distance were making this rumor more believable. Her two daughters—the older one six years old and the younger four, were sitting on the couch, looking at their mother putting plates, clothes, and bread in a bed sheet and tying it up for carrying. Hava was pregnant with her third daughter. Her husband walked out of the house, saying that he was going to check with other villagers about the rumor. The detonations were getting closer. He went to a hill above their village and never came back to Hava.

The rumor was true. A front line emerged on that hill, but Hava stayed in their house with her daughters for more than a year, until March 1993. Then she had to leave for Srebrenica where she lived until July 12, 1995. Once again, she was forced to leave. The Bosnian Serb Army had brought up buses for the women and children.

While waiting to board a bus, she turned around; lines of women with children were waiting to get on. They screamed, tripped over each other while fighting for space. Cries, sweat, and tears, fear and anxiety filled the valley as everyone pursued just one goal: to get on that bus.

Hava and her three daughters were packed aboard a bus on the way to somewhere in the middle of Bosnia. Her daughters were tired and crying. The youngest was wrapped up in a sheet. After waiting for a whole day to

get onto the bus, they spent another day traveling before they arrived at the airport in Tuzla. It was the end of all their fears. Hava was given a tent in which she and her family lived for forty days. From there they were transported to a school in Lipnica, near the airport, where they stayed for ten months. Today, Hava lives in Simin Han in a refugee shelter across from the school.

Hava's days became ordinary soon after she settled in Simin Han. She raised her daughters. During the summer and autumn, she harvested fields to support her family. But, in the winter she could barely make ends meet, even with humanitarian assistance. Hava had finished four grades of primary school when she came to Simin Han, and with this education she could not find a more stable job.

In her village, girls did not go to school. They would stay at home. Or they went for a few years and dropped out. "Those were different times," Hava says. It did not matter that she was the best pupil in her grade.

Humanitarian assistance started to arrive less frequently. Hava's earnings would not support the family. Finishing school seemed, at the time, the only way to find a job.

One morning in 1997, Hava put on her best clothes, fixed her hair, and talked to herself while she gathered courage to speak with Osman. She felt a chill walking into the school. The walls seemed to press on her shoulders. Children ran around. She walked to the third floor and found herself in the principal's office. In less than two minutes, Hava learned she could finish her last four years of school in just two. She enrolled.

There were eight adult pupils in the classroom. The classroom was filled with anxiety, shame about their age, but also hidden desire to go on. There were times when Hava did not want to go to school. The teacher encouraged her every time she felt like quitting. In her second week in the school, they had a test on mathematics. The teacher came in and distributed the tests. Hava took her sheet of paper, turned it over, and started working. She started to remember symbols and lines. She remembered her brother doing similar problems at the kitchen table in their house, back in their village, back before the war. Hava would sit next to her brother and watch him working the problems. She finished the test, got the highest grade, and showed off her paper.

Not everyone was impressed, though. Some of her neighbors, including refugee women who came with her to Simin Han, did not want to go to the school. They giggled as Hava passed by their houses. She heard them whispering that her place was at home, over the stove.

Hava finished primary and secondary school. She also finished a hair-dressing course, and today she has her own customers.

It is lunchtime when I leave Hava. Children are running down the staircase to the cafeteria. I stand in the hall. Osman comes walking up the stairs. He begins to describe how the Simin Han community gathered around its school. The parents established a council. The teachers established a council. Everyone assisted the establishment of a student council. And soon Osman began presiding over a team effort to develop new approaches to teaching. The toughest part for the teachers was to involve parents.

Azra

During her first year teaching first graders at the Simin Han school, Azra began involving parents by getting them to volunteer for physical labor. She asked the parents to show up at school on a specific day and to bring paintbrushes. The children were excited when the day arrived. The parents, confused. Packed together in a corner of the schoolyard holding paintbrushes limply in their hands as if they were afraid of what was coming next. Azra looked at them, looked back at the children, went up to the fence, and started painting it in calm hand movements—up and down, up and down. The fence was greener with every brush stroke. The parents watched for a second and then started whispering to one another. Soon, there were many hands moving brushes up and down the fence. In less than a week the school's whole fence was painted.

In a classroom at the end of a hallway, I meet Azra. Her pupils are sitting in groups, painting, reading and laughing.

I sit down in one of the chairs. A girl with big blue eyes and blond hair stares at me for some time. Her mother is standing next to her, helping out. After the class ends, I stay in the room with Azra. Teaching since 1993, she was among the first teachers to introduce interactive methods. She describes how part of the attraction of this new way of teaching had to do with the war: "The war brought changes to the way people related to one another here in Simin Han. We turned to one another for support and changed our old habits."

People trusted each other more than ever. The parents and children of the school were like a big family. "There was a girl who I will always remember," Azra says. "Mirnesa is her name. She would walk into my

classroom every day and say, 'He has not called yet.' He was her father. He was missing. One day, two years after she graduated from the school, Mirnesa came and told me her father had been found alive."

"After watching her suffer for all those years, how could I ever consider her only a student?" she asks, her fingers turning white from squeezing a pan she is holding.

During those hard times, Azra was there for the children, for whatever they needed of her. This closeness to children was inherent in her work ever since. It was 1996 when the principal informed Azra and the other teachers about methods of interactive teaching and a seminar that they were supposed to attend.

Azra walked into the conference room prepared for yet another familiar seminar, at which one could fall asleep unnoticed. She found an empty chair, seated herself comfortably and waited. The room soon filled with other teachers, and they all looked like they wanted to be somewhere else.

The trainers came in, energetic, with flipcharts, big papers, markers, toys. Azra looked around and saw many confused faces. The trainers split the teachers into groups of four. A few minutes later Azra was writing about children's psychology on a big piece of paper. Azra thought that they had worked only for a couple of minutes when the trainers asked her to present what she had written.

She felt a spasm in her stomach. Somehow she managed to say, "But, we need more time." She thought she could get away with this excuse, but the trainer said that they had worked for fifteen minutes and whatever they had written did not have to be perfect. Azra's voice trembled as she presented their work. A stream of questions came from the teachers and trainers. It was exhilarating. Dynamic. The day seemed like one forty-five minute class.

Azra returned to her class determined to apply what she had learned at this seminar. But she needed support from other teachers, the principal, parents, and students.

"Teachers were interested in these new methods, but parents were the problem," Azra says. "They were not used to coming to school for any reason other than to hear about their kids' performance or about how they had done something wrong." Now, parents would come to water the flowers, clean the schoolyard, build something. Azra seized these opportunities to talk parents into coming into the classroom itself. Osman helped by explaining to the parents that the school wanted to give their

children the extra attention they deserved. The parents were engineers, doctors, social workers, and carpenters, and they could show their children what they did in real life.

The teachers and parents organized a school newspaper, too. Children's voices were soon piping through loudspeakers in the hallways, broadcasting information. A school magazine began informing the community about the school. The pupils do most of the work, writing, taking photos, conducting interviews, designing the layout, and finally distributing the copies for free, many times to people who cannot afford to buy a daily newspaper. The magazine has promoted a community center, where children use computers, watch television, listen to music, play sports, learn foreign languages, and spend time together. Parents bring food for movie night.

Azra saw how the old method of spoonfeeding information disappeared. There was now more teamwork in the whole school, the whole community. The children became more confident and were no longer afraid to ask questions.

"There are no longer kids in the last row who never talk," Azra says.

Ismir

Ismir Husić, an eighth grader who has been president of the Simin Han school's student council for the past two years, waits for me in front of the library.

An orientation program that assists children with secondary school enrollment is one of Ismir's favorite programs. It takes a lot of cooperation with the community, with parents, and with various businesses to get this program rolling. Today, pupils from the school take field trips to local businesses to see the kinds of jobs and professions they might be interested in. With this information they and their parents decide which secondary school to attend.

"In September, I will enroll in a preparatory medical school, because I am planning to go on to undergraduate studies in medicine," Ismir says.

Ismir's other favorite project is the school's website. He leads me, running, to the library's computer, turns it on, and takes me on a cyber-tour through the school. A team, two girls and two boys, is responsible for "making connections." This is exactly how he phrased it: "making connections." And so far they have established cooperation with two

schools, one in Zvornik in the Republic of Srpska and another in Goražde.

"We go and visit them, they come to visit us here, we share our projects with them, and sometimes their teachers will teach here. This year we are planning to establish cooperation with schools in Brčko and Banja Luka, again in the Republic of Srpska," Ismir says, rushing from page to page on the website.

Students have started many other projects, such as paper recycling. Together with parents and teachers, they also built a kiln for making clay dishes and mugs, which they usually sell to their parents and teachers. The school has a bee farm and sells honey to the local market and reinvests the earnings back into the farm or some other project. From time to time, they make honey cookies. "This is a project, too," Ismir says.

Mirsad and Sanjin

"We have never turned any of our children away from the school," Osman says at the end of the day. "The war did bring a different kind of approach. During the war, there were no systems, only survival. Our attitude was that every kid belonged to the school, including the children with special needs and children with various traumas."

Osman recalls two special boys, Mirsad and Sanjin.

Mirsad would read but did not comprehend. He was shy. He refused to speak with his classmates or teachers, and sat in his chair the entire day in silence. Mirsad's teacher, Azra, spoke with his mother, but she could not help much. "Sometimes we thought things were worse when she was around as Mirsad would hide behind her," Azra said.

Azra would ask Mirsad to repeat what he had learned. Or she would ask him to tell his classmates what he had done over the weekend. Mirsad would just say a word or two and sink into his chair. One day, the boy's mother said, Mirsad imitated television commercials at home. Azra then asked the boy to join in a performance of the Grandfather and Sugar-Beet tale.

Mirsad was the mouse, the last one to help pull the beet root out of the soil. The grandfather and his other friends had failed. Mirsad's line was supposed to be: "I am the one who can help you." Mirsad stood there in front of the class in his mouse outfit. Fear gripped his face. He looked around at the other players, a grandfather, a grandmother, a granddaugh-

ter, a dog, and a cat. They all waited for him, in a line, holding each other's back. And somehow, with intonation, gestures, and a smile, he said it. He stood in the line, grabbed the back of the cat, and they all pulled the root out. After the performance, Mirsad laughed and ran around his mother repeating his sentence. "I am the one who can help you."

Sanjin's problems were more complex. He could not speak normally. He was hyperactive, and would run around the classroom without sitting still for a minute. In the beginning, his mother attended school with Sanjin, to keep him still. Nothing helped. One day he picked up a piece of chalk and started writing on the blackboard. Line after line. He did not turn back to face the classroom. Just put the chalk on the desk and walked back to his chair. When he sat down he read the words, "The spring has sprung."

"He just loves to write words on the blackboard and then recite them to the whole class," Osman says. "This is how he learned to write and count. It still takes him a whole day to complete math assignments, but he does it on his own, and that is what matters."

As of this academic year, Osman and the teachers are aiming for full integration of children with special needs.

"It is going to be really inclusive education. This means that children with special needs will go to the same class together with other children. This is a big step and challenge for us all." Osman walks over frosty snow toward his car. Night is approaching. My hands are trembling from the cold. Osman is in his red sweater. He looks at the school, then at Simin Han. Satisfaction, tiredness, and anxiety show on his face.

My day in Simin Han is ending. I shake Osman's hand, and he walks to his car. "I will see you soon. Travel back safely," he yells while pulling out of the school's parking lot. The engine noise roars away from the school. Silence covers Simin Han. Through the school windows I can see chairs, tilted against pupils' desks, waiting for tomorrow.

To Change or Not to Change?

By Alexandru Crişan, Romania

I. Before the December '89 Turnover: My Rural School

In December 1989, I was a teacher in Voluntari, a village two steps from Bucharest. It had been eleven years since I had graduated from university. During those years, the Ceauşescu regime assigned new teachers to their jobs according to rigid criteria, which meant we were always denied positions in the big cities and towns. Undertaking your assigned job in a village was mandatory. The only hope was getting assigned to a village school close enough to travel to the capital, or at least to some other town. Commuting gave us a daily dose of culture.

In a miracle, I was assigned to an extraordinary school. At first sight, it was just like any other countryside school. It was a large 1960s-era building, typical of the school buildings in better-off villages in Romania. The school had a U-shaped structure, the teachers' entrance was at the front, a bit on the left; the students' entrance on the opposite side of the building. Its classrooms were standardized, cold, unfriendly, and big enough to seat thirty students. There were tall, dirty windows, aged desks, the odd smell of the gasoline the maintenance men used to shine the floors, and ugly green and blue paint on the walls. The portrait of Romania's leader, Nicolae Ceauşescu, hung majestically on the front wall. Here and there on the other walls were signs with "mobilizing" slogans, all dusty, yellowish, stale. I remember posters reading: "The High Achievements of the Romanian School of Gymnastics" with a picture of Nadia Comaneci taken during the famous exercise in which she had earned the perfect score of 10 during the 1976 Olympics in Montreal.

"How far away is Montreal?" a pupil asked me one day, with a barely perceptible sigh in his voice.

"Very, very far away," I mumbled.

Most of Voluntari's common people worked in Bucharest—nurses, janitors, guards, factory workers, none of them highly educated. Around the school, there were shabby houses, hastily improvised by people driven by poverty from their native villages to the outskirts of the big city. In the communist universe, Voluntari was a place where the people's souls were supposed to be proud to have been "industrialized." The people would wake up around five in the morning and wait shivering for the bus that took them to the city. They came back in the evening with whatever small amounts of food they had managed to obtain after standing in an endless line at a store.

Those who were "lucky" got to attend the "popular meetings" with the Leader and his wife, Elena. These meetings were held on a regular basis in downtown Bucharest. Most of the time, the Leader and Comrade Elena would speak to the people from a balcony that would later become almost as famous as Nadia Comaneci and her perfect score of 10. During these meetings, a small group of "pioneers," the communist equivalent of the scouts, would offer the Leading Couple the "crowd's embrace." The kids in my school were envious of these lucky ones who got to hug the Ceaușescu in their guise as "The Beloved Parents of the Young Generation." It was difficult for me to explain to them why they couldn't share the same fortune. Our school was not exactly an "educational showroom," a place where the government sent delegations of foreign leaders. Getting our students spiffed up in shiny new pioneer uniforms would have burdened their parents financially.

The Voluntari school taught pupils who were seven to fourteen years old. Grades one to four formed our primary school, and five to eight, our secondary school. I had good workmates and a principal who was more than reasonable and not a political yes-man. Generally we just did our jobs and kept politics as far away as possible. Sometimes, though, politics intruded into the building: "Tomorrow there's a political education course. Inform the kids of the visit of the Comrades to the Central African Republic." "The General Inspector is attending the 'Say NO to Nuclear Weapons' meeting. Make sure all students are there." "We are to watch the funeral of Comrade Brezhnev on television . . ."

The comments of teachers and students were revealing: "Comrade Principal, they have brought cheese to the corner shop. Perhaps we can send somebody during the break to grab a place in the line for all of us." "Comrade teacher, how come there is no queuing in capitalism?" "There was no hot water again last night." "I didn't even take the kids

out for a walk. I walked them around the living room. It was as cold as outside.”

I remember the teachers as if it were yesterday: the “Comrade Teacher of Math,” always properly dressed, always serious, with a loop of hair that looked so much like Comrade Elena’s hairdo. And the “Comrade Teacher of Romanian,” always in a suit and tie. The young ones would dress more casually. One day, the Comrade Principal commented that my jeans did not quite fit my status as a Comrade Teacher. The students had to wear a uniform after all.

And I had gone to such trouble to get hold of that pair of smuggled jeans.

Most of the kids were eager to learn. They were children of common people and seemed to understand that there was no other way to advance than through hard work. The girls shared fantasies about becoming the next Nadia Comaneci—they knew she used to train six to eight hours a day—and the boys dreamed of being famous footballers.

For me and my younger colleagues, time seemed to stand still. Things that were going wrong with the system were driving us mad. All the things that could have been changed and weren’t, all the things we could have done in our tiny school with our pupils and were not doing. I somehow felt that, even though the solution was right there . . . in our school . . . in our hands . . . in ourselves, there was still nothing we could do. We had let ourselves be overwhelmed by lethargy, since there was no likelihood of any way out. Nothing humanly conceivable. We could see ourselves in that very place, in that very school, ten years later, twenty years later, thirty years later, taking the same long commute by bus every morning, doing the very same work with the very same people.

I started my Ph.D. program to keep myself busy. My doctoral studies—which required me to go to the university at least two or three times a week, to read, to write, to talk to my colleagues, to attend seminars and conferences—made me part of another world. I began to live two separate lives. In my school, I was learning about students, how to work with them, what their needs were, how one is supposed to be as a *teacher*. It was there that I learned everything that I know today, the essence of all my knowledge was molded there. One never knows everything, but I believe that in those years I understood what a child was, what education was, what I was, and what I wanted to do. It was then that I realized that education was the only thing I could or would ever do. I have been a uni-

versity professor for five years now. Even today, I do not attend a single class without happily recollecting scenes from those years in little Voluntari.

My “other world,” a lofty far-off world, was at the university. I had set an arduous reading schedule; there was no spare time for me to become aware of the growing gap between my two worlds. There was nothing for me but the present. I am horrified now at the thought that back then my path in life was perfectly predictable. At some point I would earn my Ph.D., I would stay in my small school, I would perhaps acquire a higher status as a teacher, and then—without necessarily wishing for it—I would be appointed a school principal, an inspector, and so on. Teaching at the university seemed inconceivable. So eventually, the Orwellian apparatus of school and state would chew me up and swallow me.

II. December '89 and After

The events of December 1989 came as the shock of my life. At first I couldn't believe it. There had been nothing, at least in Romania, to hint at the fall of the communist regime. In just a few days, both our outer and inner worlds were transformed. When the revolution began, the school in Voluntari was closed and everyone was enjoying the Christmas holiday. Just like so many others, I went out into the street, fighting for things we could not yet explain. At the beginning, it wasn't even a fight. It was merely astonishment at seeing Ceaușescu's power shaken, to acknowledge that something like this was possible and that we could, for the very first time, openly protest against the Ceaușescu clan. We only had to get rid of them and let what came afterward take care of itself. If only He went away! Then matters came to a head: shooting started in Bucharest, people got killed, the clan fled. More and more people took over the streets. Very soon everything became clear. From “Down with Ceaușescu!” we went to “Down with Communism!” It was only later that we understood how difficult it was to change a regime, especially the mentalities it had engendered over time.

In January 1990, when I returned to school, I stepped into a new world. The dictator's portrait was no longer hanging on the classroom wall, and I suddenly realized that I had become, overnight, my own master, a free man. I also discovered that I now had a future. What was I to do with it?

Changes kept coming. The pupils tore Comrade Ceaușescu's portraits from their textbooks. We ceased to be Comrade Teacher of Mathematics and Comrade Teacher of Romanian and we became simply teachers. Even the math teacher changed her hairstyle. The pioneer and party activists, who had once dropped by the school, had all disappeared. The inspectors were quickly replaced and would come by considerably less often. The people in school had started talking. The young physics teacher Alin became some sort of opinion leader; we had one meeting after the other, trying to change something, though we didn't know exactly what. It was a freedom that seemed to have come too fast. Everybody used to watch television.

The French teacher, Mrs. Popa, who used to speak quite freely even before the revolution, started to organize a forum for education innovation. Dorel, the pupil who had once asked me about Montreal, founded a student council, and we established a real dialogue with our students. Somebody else came up with the idea of a union. The students were more or less the same, so were the parents, but everybody had somehow become more open, less fearful. We spoke freely, creatively. Hopes were born. There was such a sweet dizziness, so many ideas, some of which were born unachievable while others were left dormant. Elections were held. The principal, loved by most of our colleagues, was reelected. The party organization in the school disappeared. In a few months, the school changed beyond recognition. Even the building's shabbiness seemed to have changed.

After this, the changes seemed to come even faster. In spring 1990, for the first time in twenty years, new research institutes started to appear. Hundreds of new opportunities opened up for young professionals. Tenure exams were taking place. "Technical high schools," created to promote industrialization, became academic high schools again. Teachers streamed back into the big cities, leaving the countryside schools almost without staff.

In April, I became a researcher with the Institute for Educational Sciences, which had reopened with new staff after being shut down years earlier. Its mission was to undertake research to reform the entire Romanian education system.

My colleagues and I went through a culture shock. After so many years of isolation, we had our first meetings with people "from the West" and entered the "lofty world of science." In a single day, I found myself transported to an international conference where I was supposed to

give—in French, a language I had almost forgotten—a presentation on the ways in which we saw our education system coming out from the communist shadow. On the morning I left, I was teaching in Voluntari. Later the same day, I passed through Bucharest’s Otopeni Airport for the first time in my life. A few hours later, I landed in the chaos of Paris’s Orly Airport and was whisked away to a village in Alsace for dinner with people in charge of education systems in Western Europe. The next day was the conference in Strasbourg at the Council of Europe Palace.

Little by little, we started advocating for changes in Romania’s schools. My colleagues and I began writing for free newspapers, traveling, speaking foreign languages again, and hoping that everything would change. We figured it would take about five or six years. We thought we knew how to change the system. I was chosen for the front line in the struggle, the effort that would attempt to pierce the heart of communist Romania’s education system: the school curricula and syllabus. I didn’t suspect what was about to happen.

III. Why Change? Convincing People on the Need to Change

Why change? At the beginning, I didn’t know the answer myself. I felt something had to be changed in the education system. But I couldn’t say precisely what. The conversations I used to have with my colleagues would move back and forth from changing *everything* to changing only *some things*. We had difficulty, however, defining what these *things* would be. And yet I somehow understood where my sense of direction came from. I had seen for so many years what was happening to the students facing an inflexible, lifeless system that fed them information, told them what to do and not to do, and required them to think for themselves as little as possible. Worst of all, the system never encouraged the students to ask questions; it never inspired them to wonder. We were actually creating perfect robots for a world that regarded itself as perfect. The kids knew a lot but nobody was teaching them *why* they needed to know and, most importantly, *how* to use what they knew.

There was an acute need for a different system, a system that would teach people to be free and make decisions consciously. But how was one supposed to do that in a society that was just beginning to crawl after decades of paralysis?

Each day at the Bucharest offices of our institute, we kept coming up with various strategies, each more implausible than the previous. Reform seemed so easy, something that could be accomplished quickly. We were convinced that everybody could hardly wait for reform. All it would take was telling people, “Make some changes!” and they would all happily embark on the journey.

A rivalry developed between the institute and the Ministry of Education. For at least two years after 1990, except for the ministry’s top officials—the minister, deputy minister, and general managers, who were exceptional people but as confused as we were by the shock and the swiftness of changes—the ministry offices were still filled with Ceaușescu-era bureaucrats. They always seemed to know better what should be preserved in the old system, and why. They were outraged by the idea of changing a system in which students were taught to be obedient and compliant, to salute authority, to await directives and answers from above, and, especially, never to ask questions. The bureaucratic resistance to any innovative idea spared nothing and nobody. How could some people claim that the Romanian education system, which mass-produces top-prize winners in international Olympiads, had to be changed? Out of the question! We take the dictator’s picture out of the school textbooks and we keep going. Most people working in the education system at the time agreed.

The institute with its restless, young members was a threat to this establishment.

One chilly morning in February 1991, I was at the ministry with a group from the institute to meet with the director in charge of the syllabus. A respectable man, fifty-five to sixty years old, primly dressed in white shirt and tie, a textbook author for many years, he looked dumbfounded. Where did you people come from? What is it that you want? We had heard that he was quite obsessed with the thought that some people wanted to emulate “Western models” that simply did not fit a Romania whose top athletes were Olympic champions and whose top students won contests abroad. “What do you mean cut down on content?” the director asked. “Would you like us to end up like the Americans who don’t have a clue who Shakespeare or Tolstoy are, or where Romania is on the map? The Romanian education system is very good as it is. Why should we change? What do you mean ‘critical thinking’? Why do students need that? They should first learn and then be critical.”

One of my colleagues shot back: “You know, sir, you can hardly say that a system is good by citing only a few exceptional cases like the Olympiad winners. They are truly exceptional, gifted children. But what percentage of the system do they represent? It would be wrong to evaluate a whole system using them as the only point of reference. Our students know so many things, but they have no idea what to do with them. We are really behind when it comes to developing abilities, attitudes. We always speak of ‘children’ in general and forget that the majority of students are at such a low level. The question is how can we bring all of the children, not just some of them, to an acceptable level?”

“Don’t worry,” the syllabus director answered. “If they know their stuff, they’ll have a whole lifetime before them to learn how to use what they know.”

The same arguments would go on in other offices of the ministry.

We were berated for being under an “evil Western and American influence” and for seeking “willful destruction of the exceptional tradition and quality of Romanian education.” Few Romanians understood that a democratic society *requires* a different kind of education or the fact that democracy begins at school.

Beyond the ministry, things were not much better. After I presented arguments for reform at a teachers’ meeting in Tecuci, a small town in a remote part of the country, Galati county, a well-dressed woman wearing her hair in the proper Elena Ceaușescu loop asked me the following questions: “If the Romanian education system is so poor, where do *you* come from? If everything is so wonderful there in the West and all so wrong here, how come you are still around? It is our kids who win the international contests. We are definitely better than they are.”

The best I could have done was to ask why everything in Romania had gone so terribly wrong if everything was fine with our education system.

Back at the institute, we kept pondering the idea of change. In December 1991, two of my colleagues and I published a rather unpretentious article about changing Romanian education, mainly the curriculum. After two years of searching and wondering, we had finally come up with some concrete strategies. But everything was still just words on paper, and we were still just a couple of poor researchers. The locus of power remained two blocks away in the ministry building. And it still seemed that nobody there wanted to know we existed.

I don't remember how a translated version of the article got to the members of a World Bank team preparing an education reform project in Romania. But it did and we received our first real attention and support.

We continued working. We started writing a book about ways to change the curricula, syllabuses, and textbooks. We sought to understand what the people wanted from their schools. We took dozens of trips around the country. We met and talked with thousands of teachers. We had surveys taken on what had to be changed and how. We discussed, debated, came up with solutions, dismissed them, and went back to where we had started, over and over again.

In 1993, we circulated throughout the country the first post-1990 syllabus. The new curricula did not include those endless content-related lists about *what* the student should learn. Instead, it described, clearly and explicitly, why learning is necessary and how exactly learning takes place in the classroom. It somehow became clear why students should learn various subjects. "In learning the Romanian language and literature, students acquire social communication skills: debate, conversation, polemics, exchange of opinions, listening to others, suitable turn-taking, and others. It is important that they are able to communicate clearly, coherently, and efficiently in daily-life situations. To this end, we recommend discussion groups, teamwork, group achievement of specific learning tasks."

Sometimes teachers reacted positively to the new curriculum. But nothing was done.

In 1993, the institute team issued the *White Paper of Romanian Education*, identifying the core problems of the Romanian education system: the focus on data and information and not on individual student capabilities, on what was being taught and not on what was actually learned, the Olympiad myth that projected us in some sort of utopian world, the lack of real equal opportunities for the children in rural schools, overloaded syllabuses, lack of information related to what our students actually know how to do once they graduate, theoretical rather than practical teacher training, and so on. The paper also included a sound strategy as to the main directions of the reform.

The big problem, however, came when we had to identify how we were going to change the teacher-training system, how the universities would agree to step out of their academic isolation, how exactly the teachers would be persuaded that it was not the amount of information that mattered, but the quality of teaching, not *what* they were teaching,

but how much they managed to change the student for the better through what and how they taught.

We suffered one setback after the other, punctuated by a few victories. The myth of “our Olympiad winners,” of “our unparalleled education system” would not wear off. The penetration of innovations into the lower layers of the system was slow.

IV. Political Change and Momentum

After six years of left-wing domination, the opposition came to power in Romania in 1996. It was a rather eclectic coalition: Christian Democrats, Democrats, Liberals, and the Hungarian minority representatives. But, as a result, the bureaucracy underwent a sea change. Overnight, outsiders like us became leaders of government institutions and boards. I was appointed president of the National Board of Curriculum in Romania.

Strangely enough, education reform seemed even more stuck than before. The new government’s first minister for education was convinced that he knew everything and gave me and all my colleagues *ad hoc* curriculum lessons that we would sit through out of courtesy. For the next year, we lived through false starts.

Then, in December 1997, another new minister of education was appointed. Andrei Marga, the rector of the University of Cluj, was almost a legend in Romania. He had made Cluj into a Western European institution in a country that had lost its European drive during the ascendancy of communism.

In his very first statement as minister, Marga declared that the main issue in the Romanian education system was curriculum change. It was, he said, the only way to educate people for a completely different kind of society. He could not have known what we had been producing for years at our institute. And he believed the only curriculum and syllabus work that existed were the few new syllabuses and alternative textbooks.

On a winter night in December 1997 or January 1998, we met Marga. I started telling him about everything we had accomplished at the institute and about all the people behind it. I handed him, one by one, piles of our materials, some published, some in draft form, on curriculum frameworks as well as the model syllabus. I explained to Marga the concepts behind our work. I told him why all these documents had been kept hidden. He was stunned. “But why isn’t all this known? Who locked them away, not

letting them go where they should, into the system?” Marga asked me to give him a day or two to go through everything I had shown him. He said he would do his best to read them thoroughly.

The next morning, at 8:30, I got a phone call and an invitation to his office. He told me he had been reading all night. “What you have given me here is precisely what we need to establish the new National Curriculum. Now, it’s all about making it official, discussing it as part of the system. The foundation has been laid. What about the people who made all this possible, where have they been kept all along?”

Word spread. Everyone at the institute went crazy, working at a frantic pace. All that hadn’t been sorted out for years, started taking shape quickly. Marga’s goal was to accomplish in a single year everything that had been neglected for seven. He was composed and determined. He knew how to listen and how to make the best of what he could find around him.

I and my colleagues Dakmara, Mihaela, Adrian, Eugen, and Șerban would meet every week. We would hold seminars and debates to discuss the curriculum framework, the new syllabus. Romanian education lay at our feet. In this period of productive frenzy, the changes were many, amazing and fast. Between January and December 1998, we finalized and published for the first time in Romania a curriculum framework that was perfectly consistent with the current international standards. We reorganized the old primary education syllabus. We published an integrated curriculum for grades one to four and the compulsory grades five to eight. The concept of the curriculum was made part of the Education Act and was certified as either core curriculum or school-based curriculum. New institutions were established.

Most of us at the institute thought that once we had reform underway in Bucharest, the whole country would follow quite naturally.

V. The End or a New Beginning

One morning, in November 1998, I travelled from Bucharest to visit a small school high in the Apuseni (Western) Mountains, a place in the middle of nowhere. It was an old school building, typical of the schools built in the early 1900s. I arrived with a local county inspector around noon in terrible cold. The primary school students in the first shift had already left. The second shift—grades five to eight—was underway. It was like stepping back

into an early part of my life. The rooms were just as I remembered them from my teaching years in Voluntari. Worn-out desks, many of which were broken, grungy blackboards that almost collapsed to the floor, old fireplaces that radiated insufficient heat. Now, like the inspectors Ceaușescu's ministry had sent to Voluntari, I was the "ministry gentleman," one of those officials from Bucharest in charge of building the reform. I was wearing casual clothes, though not the jeans I used to wear as a teacher, and the people in the school found it surprising that this "ministry gentleman" was a little younger than the usual age. The principal wondered what on earth were we doing there? Nobody had told him anything about it—not that they could have, because the school had no phone and it was only seldom that one of the teachers would go to the county seat for some meeting or other. The people seemed just as disconnected.

The teachers wore plain clothes and weary faces. Their hands still bore the marks of hard work in the fields, for the autumn harvest season had just ended. Most of them taught with their coats on, because it was freezing inside. The kids were sitting two or three to a desk, watching us with wide, inquisitive eyes. Most of them wore cheap clothes and trembled with the cold. I asked them whether they liked coming to school, and they said yes.

"What do you like about it?"

"Well, everything."

"What do you mean, everything, can you name a few things?"

"Well, we like it when the teacher tells us to read from the book and then asks us to retell what we've read. Or when the teachers tell us about things that are not in the textbook."

"And, what else?"

"And we like it when we find characters of our age in the textbooks."

"It's quite chilly over here!"

"You know, sir," the principal said, "the wood ration has run out. Kids are bringing wood from home."

"Is there anything *you* want to ask me?" I said to the children.

"What is it that you want to see here?" a girl in the first desk asked me.

They seemed quite startled when I told them that I wanted to LEARN what they liked and what they didn't about their school. Nobody had ever asked them such things.

The meeting I had with the teachers was quite satisfactory. I had been one of them. I could see myself in my old school, just a few years before.

Then, I took the time to attend some classes and I was shocked. Nothing seemed to have changed. The teachers were teaching in the same old way. The same way they had taught ten years before, twenty years before, forty years before. The teacher came into the classroom with the register under his arm. The student on duty reported on absentees, and they were marked down. Then a couple of pupils were called to the front of the classroom and “asked” about the previous lesson. Some knew it better than others, and the grades came with a few fleeting remarks: “This time you were not that well prepared.” “It would do you a world of good to start studying harder.”

Then, abruptly, there was a new lesson. The topic was written on the blackboard. The students copied it down in their notebooks. The teacher, who never left his desk, covered around 70 percent of the lesson. I counted the questions he asked the class—around ten. All related to information. Not even one question made the students think, wonder, discuss, debate. None of the students asked anything.

The kids sat there silently, obediently, behind their worn-out desks. The teacher taught and the students listened. It was hard to tell whether they actually learned anything. But nobody seemed to be concerned.

I was afraid to ask whether anyone had actually heard about our new national curriculum. It was like a blow to the chest and a void in my soul. The distance between what we were promoting “from the top down” and what was actually taking place “at the bottom” was huge. It seemed somehow that all those years of hard work had been in vain. I started wondering to what extent what we were doing in Bucharest was meaningful. Initiatives can come from above, sometimes they must. But such initiatives will fail if we can’t find ways, from the very beginning, to make the schools the leading actors and players in the reform process.

I left the school late in the evening after talking with the teachers about this and many other things. I don’t know whether they reached any conclusion. I did. I had to find a way to come back to where I had started, to take it from the very beginning, to change the perspective knowing, this time, a bit more than I had a few years before.

In December 1998, I resigned as president of the National Board of Curriculum in Romania’s Ministry of Education and became the head of the Education Department of the Open Society Foundation–Romania and

then president of the newly created Center Education 2000+, a member of the Soros Open Network in Romania. My focus was now “bottom up.” My goal was to give the teachers in the schools a bigger say in the reforms they would make happen.

Debate Was the Question Mark, School Was the Full Stop

By Tomislav Reškovic, Croatia

*"I may be wrong and you may be right, and by an effort, we may get nearer to the truth."
Karl Raimund Popper, 1902–1994*

For Anamarija, Ana, Azra, Branka, Elizabeta, Irina, Mirna, Sanja, Sena,
Tijana, Una, and Višnja

Foreword

Before I start this story about debate, I owe readers answers to two questions. Both are, I believe, logical and perfectly appropriate, and the answers to them may make the story more relevant.

First, why is there, in a book dealing with large structural and system changes in the educational systems of South East Europe, a story on a relatively small education initiative such as the debate program. Indeed, in the ten years of its existence, the debate program in Croatia has changed neither the structure of the education system, nor any of its key elements, nor its character. The answer to the question, however, is deceptively simple.

This chapter on changes in Croatian education in the past decades does not deal with system changes because such changes simply did not take place. Not only has Croatia's education system remained basically unchanged in the past ten years, it has remained unchanged in the past fifty years. In fact, the only two structural changes that took place in the last fifty years cancelled each other out. The first took place in 1976, with the abolishment of the *gymnasium*, a kind of secondary school with a long tradition in Central European education systems, the main function of which was general education, i.e., preparation for university. The second change, which happened fifteen years later, was diametrically opposed to the first: it reinstated the gymnasiums.

Everything else in Croatia's education system remained more or less the same as it had been in the mid-1950s: the same types of institutions, the same management, financing, and teacher education principles, the

same curricular models and goals. The only thing that distinguishes Croatia's education system today from the one fifty years ago is the number of computers in schools, but it is as yet unclear whether this has anything to do with education.

After a description like this, a benevolent reader may conclude that we are obviously dealing with a particularly good education system. After all, if nothing important has changed in the education system for over half a century, it must be functioning well. A reader who adds a breath of patriotism to his benevolence may proudly point to numerous world-renowned Croatians—from artists to doctors to economists to scientists. However, *horribile dictu*, I am afraid this was possible despite, rather than thanks to, our education system. In a country where less than 8 percent of the over-fifteen population obtains a university degree and almost 40 percent does not complete any kind of secondary education, things are obviously not so bright. Thus, instead of a larger story on system changes, this chapter on Croatia tells a small story about personal changes. Changes like these do not have the epic reach of institutional changes, nor the drama of system reforms. But they take place at the very heart of education—in the young people themselves.

Second, what is debate, anyway? This question will, I hope, be largely answered by the story itself. However, I believe that a few sentences of preliminary explanation will not be amiss. Debate is a highly structured manner of discussion in which one team (the affirmative side) defends and the other (the negative side) opposes a certain proposition (resolution). The propositions to be debated may pertain to either *value* statements (e.g., the death penalty is justified) or to *policy* (e.g., Croatia's government should allow homosexual marriages). Judges decide the winning side exclusively on the basis of the arguments and evidence presented. There are four dominant forms of debate: policy, parliamentary, Lincoln-Douglas, and Karl Popper debate. They differ in the type of resolution, the number of team members, and the length of speeches, as well as in some other details. The debate program in this story is based upon the Karl Popper form, which promotes debate that is significantly less competitive, and significantly more educational, than the others.

Una and Ana are twenty-five now, Sena a few months younger. When I first met them, in the spring of 1994, they were sixteen and had hearts sown onto their jeans; by the end of the year, they had all grown a few centimetres. Jura was in the second year of the gymnasium as well: he had just discovered anarchism and punk and talked about the politics and music of The Clash with a glimmer in his eyes. Una would speak only when asked a direct question, and inevitably blushed when answering. The four of them are not only this story's principal characters, they are its true authors.

That year, 1994, was my fifth year teaching philosophy at Zagreb's XVI gymnasium. The building that housed the school had been constructed in the 1920s in a style of architecture that left uninformed observers confused about what the building actually contained. It may have been a school. It may have been a hospital or a military barracks. It might even have been a nunnery. Long corridors led to huge classrooms containing nothing except the students' desks and chairs and the teacher's desk. All the desks faced forward, toward the teacher's desk, the *omphalos* of the teacher-centered universe, the source of all knowledge and wisdom. The teacher entered the classroom, and the students stood up, just as I used to stand up in those very same classrooms some ten years earlier.

In 1994, as in every other year, I was assigned almost two hundred new students. I made a great effort to memorize their names by the end of the first semester. How could I ask their opinions on something if I didn't even know their names? And the fact that they did have all sorts of opinions seemed truly important to me.

The prescribed curriculum was pointless and rigid, and it faithfully reflected the authoritarian character of the régime that had prescribed it. The then-minister of education publicly claimed that her educational credo was based upon the Bible and the whip. In accordance with this, classroom walls started sporting crucifixes and portraits of the president. Public schools were less and less public, more and more state schools.

Five years of teaching are long enough to make teachers dissatisfied not only with *what* they are doing and *how* they are doing it, but also *where* they do it. When I started teaching, I believed that, if my goal was to teach something to somebody, I had to know everything. Furthermore, I believed that I was always only a few details away from perfect knowledge. Very soon, as it happens in life, I discovered that I knew very little, and that scared me. Then I started constructing firm, Hegelian structures in order to create a framework that would simplify

matters for me. The framework was firm indeed, but neither did I qualify as Hegel, nor did the young people that I worked with qualify as agents of absolute spirit. Thus, after five years, I was back to a kind of new start. I had a pretty clear picture of what I did not want; but the only thing I knew I did want—how to teach in a meaningful way—was a complete mystery.

Around March, I received a call from the Open Society Institute–Croatia, a member of the foundation network founded by the American financial guru and philanthropist George Soros. I was asked to come to a discussion on an education program they intended to start. The foundation's offices were located in the old part of the town, in an apartment of some 100 square meters, and it always seemed to be filled with people. The place looked more like a cross between a coffee shop, a bookshop, and the front desk of an anarchist magazine just before the closing of a new issue. The then-director of the foundation, Karmen Bašić, sat me on a chair in a less noisy corner of the apartment and, in a few sentences, told me the idea of the debate program for high school kids. I remember having a lot of questions, for which she had few answers, but I liked the idea itself, the positive energy that radiated from Karmen, and the vibrant chaos in which I found myself. So, when at last she asked me whether I would be willing to help start the debate program, I said yes with almost no hesitation, even though the only thing I had ever managed to start in my life was my old Citroen 2CV that ran out of fuel on the highway to Rijeka.

Three weeks later, I was sitting in a grimy compartment on a train to Budapest, together with Daniela and Marijan, graduates of English and phonetics at the School of Humanistic Sciences in Zagreb. As the train dragged itself over the Pannonian plain and along the shore of Lake Balaton, we talked about and guessed at what was in store for us at the debate seminar to which we were headed. In the evening of the same day, we were sitting at a table with some thirty other colleagues, mostly high school teachers from Central and East European countries. This was the first time since the beginning of the war in Croatia in 1991 that I spoke to people from Serbia. In those days, there were no telephone connections or postal services between Croatia and Serbia, and relatively few people used e-mail. Croatia's media were reticent about what was going on over there, and the little information we did get was most often adapted to the needs of political propaganda. In Serbia, of course, the situation was no better. So, at first, we eyed each other warily, un-

certain what to expect from one another. After only a few days, however, our need to communicate overcame the initial unease; I notice this same need overcoming reluctance, still with some sort of a surprise, at international debate events where kids from countries of ex-Yugoslavia take part.

We spent the week in intense work, from dawn till dusk, preparing debates, debating, discussing how to start the program in our respective countries. Almost everything seemed possible. When I returned to my school, the range of possibilities, of course, grew significantly smaller. Still, the director of my school gave a surprisingly quick assent to the formation of a debate club. I asked some of my colleagues to help me spread the word about the new club. About ten days after my return from Budapest, I had the first meeting with my future debaters.

At the initial meeting, there were eleven girls, including Una and Ana. A week later, Sena joined us, and that was how the Lasses, as we named our club, was formed.

"The first thing I remember," says Ana, "is when we learned how to define. We had to define an apple, and then a bicycle, and I remember it was hard. But I felt great. In those days, you see, I was convinced that only A students were invited to debate. I had finished my first year with a C, and it was fantastic for me that I, like, managed to wheedle my way into this debate thing."

We met once a week, after classes, and we worked for an hour or two. First, we tackled the rules of the debate and the roles of individual speakers, and then the construction of the argument. I would prepare exercises for each meeting—argumentation, refutation, fallacies, speaking. And, despite my beginner's uncertainties, everything went rather smoothly until we came to the first debate. That was when I first noticed uneasiness in them, the fear of debate that I faced constantly later. "I remember the fear," says Una, "the fear of speaking." "The first debate was traumatic. Introvert that I am, I had such a case of butterflies in my stomach," says Sena, "that I held onto the desk with both hands in order to hide the shaking." Jura, who had started debating in the fifth gymnasium club, remembers an identical experience: "We went to present the debate in Osijek. We prepared like crazy for the debate, which was on animal rights. We had been expecting that a few of our colleagues would come to see us, and then we found ourselves in a school hall crammed with 150 people. One of my legs shook uncontrollably, and I had to stand by putting all my weight on it."

As they got scared, I got concerned. I was able to provide rational explanations for the causes of the fear: that was not difficult. Croatian schools are not constructed to help students overcome insecurity and gain self-confidence. Often it's quite the opposite: the system stresses the students' ignorance, rather than their knowledge, and their weaknesses rather than their strengths. But no matter how clear this was on a rational level, emotionally it was hard for me to deal with the fact that the *Lasses* were shaking with fear before the debate, and I caught myself wondering whether the whole thing made any kind of sense, whether there was any justification for it.

Luckily, whenever my doubts showed, the *Lasses* made it clear they wanted to go on. Here's what Una has to say about this: "I was aware of it then as well. You know it hurts, but it's supposed to hurt; you know it's something that you and you alone have to do. I think that, for me, it was much more important than for people who had a natural knack for dealing with such situations. Sometimes I think debate is perfect for someone who doesn't want to deal with debates at all. For me it was a kind of liberation."

"In debate," says Sena, "I saw changes in myself, in the way I function, and then I realized I can do things well. The atmosphere at the club was liberal and encouraging. If you couldn't do something, it was all right. Nobody made us do anything, but we felt that we could, that we knew how, that we were able to do things. If I said or did something silly, the reaction was encouraging: hold on, think it over, perhaps it's not exactly like that, perhaps there's another way. In debate, I did some things that I never would have thought myself capable of."

And so, encouraging each other, we went on: the *Lasses* continued to deal with their fears, and I with my doubts.

In the autumn, after Daniela, Marijan, and I had worked for a few months with our clubs, we organized the first teacher seminar for future debate club leaders. The *Lasses* went with us to hold a presentation debate. The seminar was held in Crikvenica, a small town on the Adriatic coast, a three-hour drive from Zagreb. "When we took the van to Crikvenica," recalls Ana, "Una was totally freaked out, completely panicked, saying there's no way she could do it." Una recalls why. "We were going to present a debate after two or three months of work, and to me it seemed that the teachers were just waiting for us to get there so they could swallow us."

Some twenty teachers from the whole country gathered in Crikvenica and, even on the first day, after only ten hours of work, the atmosphere

was fantastic. “In Crikvenica, we worked like mad,” Ana says. “Sometimes I think the only thing I can remember from those days are debates and debate preparations, but that was okay with me.” In the evenings, after all that work, we would spend hours sitting and talking on the hotel terrace. Mostly—and now it sounds completely deranged—about the debate.

After the autumn seminar, the first twenty high school debate clubs were started in Delnice, Osijek, Pakrac, Pula, Slavonski Brod, Split, Zadar, and Zagreb, and some four hundred students began debating. Soon the first student seminars began, and by springtime we held our first tournaments.

I no longer worked only with the Lasses. I also prepared debate materials for all the clubs, participated in managing the program, and organized and led seminars and tournaments. Of course, I still taught at the school, and more and more I felt the difference between what I could accomplish in regular school hours, and what we accomplished at debate. It seems that the Lasses felt it even more strongly.

“In debate, we all worked together,” Sena says about how we operated. “You were still our teacher, but it wasn’t like school, where somebody comes and tells you what to say. We sat together, and we thought, and we discussed things, and if we said something very stupid, you’d say, ‘Well, maybe it’s not exactly like that.’ We worked together, and we learned to ask when we didn’t know something—at least I did. I had always had a problem raising my hand and asking when I didn’t know something, because I felt someone would tell me that I was stupid. In the debate program, I learned things that were much more important than the things I learned at school. I learned to think logically, to read critically. We read an awful lot, we were always digging through literature. It was important for me to learn to analyze what I was told. At that time, I always agreed with authority figures: if an authority figure told me something, then that was that. And here was debate, telling me there were two sides, or three, four, five, and that things are not as simple as they look.”

Jura had a similar experience. “Nothing was done *ex cathedra*. We discussed things and thought about them in a completely different manner. This kind of communication does not exist in our school system. The fact that we could discuss certain things ourselves—without the teacher telling us the right way—was very important for me. Speaking from today’s perspective, I learned to think about things freely, I learned that there are no taboos.”

Ana is still very passionate speaking about it. “When it comes to regular school, to all the things that happened there, I spent four years trying to pretend it wasn’t happening. I ignored it almost completely. On the other hand, debate was the only thing that I did without having to make an effort to fit in. It was completely natural for me to do that, just like it was completely natural to sit down and have coffee with someone. I felt normal, I didn’t feel that something was being done to me, but rather that what we were doing there made sense, that we were dealing with a problem. This was the key difference for me. Of course, at that time, I did not wonder what the meaning of it all was, or what I was going to accomplish. But at least we weren’t doing something that would never be of any use to anyone. In class, I felt that whatever was taking place had nothing to do with me, but I had to sit down and keep quiet. Debate activated me fantastically. It engaged me. It was interesting to finally have a task that was a challenge, as if there was something calling to you to resolve it.”

“From today’s perspective, the difference between debate and school is even clearer: they are diametrically opposed. Debate and school had completely different goals, methods, value systems—and different kinds of relationships between the teacher and the student. I think I already knew it then, but didn’t spend much time thinking about it, because I perceived school as a great big nothing. It was a necessary evil. I did not bother with the injustice and boredom of it all, I ignored it. School was a dull place, boring in a mind-boggling way. We just sat there. The teachers didn’t even get on my nerves. It’s not that I didn’t like them, or that they treated us badly—they didn’t. They were simply and clearly boring. They thought that they were teachers and that they had this textbook we had to digest. I remember, for example, Croatian language classes where I would almost regularly fall asleep because it was dictation. We would write it all down, and then we would learn it by heart and parrot it back. Even if it were interesting and useful knowledge, it was organized in such a way that you couldn’t find the interesting bits, because they were buried so deep.

“In debate, it was important that we think about things, while in school that didn’t matter at all. In fact, often it was desirable not to think about things because this was a waste of time. In debate there was nothing to memorize, or there was, but it was only collateral. There was no way you could not remember the facts you needed and then get up and speak for five minutes, no way I would not remember those things when I prepared the debate in the way I did. This came naturally. It was impor-

tant for me to think about things, to manage to arrive at certain positions, to be able to argue them, to justify them, to express them publicly in a well-articulated manner so people could understand. It was also important to listen to what others were saying, to understand them, and to challenge them in a meaningful way. And what I remember as something of supreme importance: we learned not to be cruel, not to be aggressive, not to be condescending, to base all our objections exclusively on arguments.”

Una describes the difference very succinctly: “School just stuffs you, it totally crams you with things and puts you in a completely passive position. You’ve got no voice of your own, and it’s not important that you develop one. Debate, on the other hand, puts you into a total question-mark state, where you always have to look for things yourself. Debate is the question mark, the question mark that pulls you further on, and school is the full stop.”

The subjects we debated in those days were hardly ever discussed in public, and not at all in schools. “The subjects were interesting,” Jura says, “because they were controversial. We debated the legalization of soft drugs, the death penalty, abortion, religious education in schools, things about which people my age either did not think at all, or they didn’t talk about, not because they weren’t interested, but because they had no opportunity to do so.”

As I was listening to the taped debates of the Lasses, I saw them debating again:

Dear colleagues, dear opponents, as you know, today we debate the justification of the death penalty, and our team will try to prove that the death penalty is indeed justified. The term “death penalty” indicates the procedure undertaken by the state which, following the laws and after a fair trial, punishes the perpetrators of the most grievous crimes by taking their lives. The most grievous crimes, for us, represent the deliberate taking of another’s life in a particularly cruel manner. Of course, even though we believe that the death penalty is justified, we do not feel that the death penalty is good by itself. The theory of ethics distinguishes between intrinsic good, which is good of and by itself, and instrumental good, leading to something that is good. The death penalty, as is the case with the use of force in self-defense, is not intrinsically good, but it is instrumentally good. It is instrumentally good because its usefulness for the society is twofold. Firstly, it promotes the principle of justice, and secondly, it deters possible future perpetrators of crimes. These are, at the same time, our two key arguments. In the first one, we will show not only

that the death penalty is a just penalty for the perpetrators of most grievous murders, but also that justice is particularly important for the human community. In the second argument, we shall demonstrate that the death penalty also serves a preventive role, as fear of the penalty is one of the most important ways of deterring future crimes. . . .

Sena had a similar experience to Jura's. "For me, the subjects were terribly interesting, they were my subjects. These things were like food to me, because they were never discussed at school, and I found it terribly important that someone else was interested in discussing them."

"I particularly enjoyed the subjects that I now feel were hard for me then, maybe even a little too hard," Ana says. "For example, the debate on the thesis that all great artists are already dead. It was a crazy idea, and just the right kind of bait for me, the right amount of difficulty to pull me in. It was important for me because I myself had an awful lot of questions on these subjects, and that fired me up. Normally I wasn't like that, I was almost uninterested in the world around me, and almost nothing interested me enough to make an effort, I was really shallow."

. . . Dear colleagues, we have heard the affirmative team present what in their opinion are two firm arguments in favor of the death penalty. In our opinion, their arguments are extremely weak, as the first one is contradictory, and the other poorly supported by evidence. In the first argument, our opponents claim that the death penalty is justified as it is the only just penalty for cruel murders. As the death penalty is the most severe form of penalty, it is obvious that murder, the taking of another's life, is the most grievous crime. Therefore, our opponents base their entire argumentation on the belief that human life is the highest value, which means that crimes against human life are the most grievous crimes, which, of course, deserve the most severe penalty. However, we feel, on the one hand, that claiming that human life is the highest value and, on the other, that taking human life is justified, is utterly contradictory. If human life is the highest value, if the right to life is the highest right—and we believe it is so—then the taking of human life can never be just or justified. As for their second argument, which claims that the death penalty is justified because it frightens potential murderers and thus deters them from committing the crimes, this claim has no actual support in evidence. . . .

We spent weeks preparing the debates; every five- or six-minute speech was propped up by hours and hours of work, discussion, thought, and reading. This was the part of my work with the Lasses that I liked best and, when I look at things now, it was one of the most precious pro-

fessional and life experiences I have ever had. Gradually, preparation for a debate became almost more important than the debate itself.

"For me, there was never enough preparation," recalls Una. "I always wanted to read more, to prepare more." Ana, on the other hand, says: "I had no stage-fright problems with the debate itself, I never got butterflies in my stomach like the other girls, but I enjoyed the preparation so much more than the debate; for me, this was the meaning of the whole story. In the debate, I didn't care in the least who was going to win and who was going to lose. Of course, I wanted us to be good, but the preparation gave a much better feeling."

Sena agrees. "Yes, of course, my debating improved, but what I really cared about was that we prepared the debates together. We had the feeling we were creating something together and that meant a lot to me. It also felt good that there was no competition within our club, neither between ourselves nor in relation with the other clubs. We wanted to make a good debate, to say something smart, something meaningful, something original. If we had cared about winning, we would have won more."

. . . Our opponents say it is contradictory to claim that human life is the highest value and the right to life the highest right and yet support the death penalty. But, this is entirely incorrect. It is "unreasonable to think that by taking the life of a man who did this to someone else we do not show our desire to respect human life. Quite the contrary, this desire is indicated to the utmost by accepting the rule that those taking the rights of others forfeit their own rights," says J. S. Mill in his famous speech in favor of the death penalty. After all, what are we supposed to do when attacked by a murderer? Wait to be killed in order not to hurt the murderer's right? . . .

Preparing a debate is a specific kind of work, a somewhat schizophrenic kind of work. First of all, the debaters learn the thesis of the debate, but they do not know in advance whether they will be assigned to argue the affirmative or the negative side. In other words, they do not know whether they will have to defend or to refute the thesis. So teams must prepare both the affirmative and the negative case, trying to form well-founded arguments for each side. Furthermore, it often happens that they find themselves forced to defend points of view with which they disagree. This can be very difficult and very confusing.

"For me," says Una, "debate opened the perspective of relativity, which was important for me then, when I was fifteen or sixteen, but also later. To be able to move away from a certain position, no matter how

much you care about it, that's important for developing empathy and understanding other people. For example, it doesn't matter why someone is gay. It is quite irrelevant whether it's natural or not—the only thing that matters is how that person feels in a society consisting mostly of heterosexuals. And you get that by moving away from things and looking at things from different perspectives. This was crucially important for me with regard to school as well, because school has a system of telling you 'this is the truth, this is it, this is how you read literature, this is how you read history.' Debate is always telling you that it's not the only way, that positions are relative, that they're always points of view, not in the sense of 'oh, well, all's relative, let's go home,' but relative in the sense that there is no single absolute truth valid for everyone. This is what debate has taught me, and this is terribly important, and probably priceless. Today I'll think hard before I bite someone's head off, not because I'm more careful or more rigid, but because of some kind of tolerance, care, the feeling that one must listen as well as speak."

. . . We have heard that the person breaking someone else's right forfeits their own right. What does that mean? That we can steal whatever we want from a thief? That the state should punish thieves by taking away their property? Human rights, particularly such elementary rights as the right to life, cannot be forfeited and cannot be taken. To take away someone's human right is to take away a part of their humanity. This is why, as we know from the Declaration on Human Rights, human rights are unalienable. The death penalty is not an act of justice, but rather simple revenge: an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. . . .

"At that time, I held some militantly liberal views which were, of course, not entirely mine," Sena says. "But, whether you like it or not, debate teaches you that there are other viewpoints and that you must know your own views and how to express them. I debated on different things in my own head—that's how you reach the point of understanding why your view is what it is, and not something else. For me, this was cool, it was as if I had opened a door for myself, it gave me a feeling of freedom. On the other hand, what I learned through debate is tolerance, an elementary respect for other people and their rights. Debate is actually real civic education, not in the sense of learning it, but putting it into practice. You can learn the definition of democracy in other places and by other means, but in debate you practice democracy in relation to other people, by listening, by asking, by looking at both sides."

. . . The key point of this debate is the conflict regarding the consistency of our position, in which the death penalty is justified because it represents a just punishment for the taking of another's life. Our opponents have tried to show this as contradictory, because life is taken in the name of life, and the right to live in the name of the right to live. But they forget an important difference: on one side, we have the life and the right of an innocent person to life, and on the other, the life and the right of a murderer to life. We believe that the person showing no respect for the other's right to live thereby forfeits his or her own right to live. . . .

"I think that I can exactly pinpoint the moment," Ana recalls, "when I realized I no longer had a firm, clear, one-sided attitude toward anything, but I don't recall a single moment when that made me feel bad. I was really glad it happened. It wasn't the kind of 'what do I think about anything now' feeling. I didn't feel threatened in my own opinions or attitudes by the fact that there are conflicting points of view that can be defended up to a point. Quite the contrary, I liked it because of this feeling of freedom, the feeling that I was now really choosing my own point of view."

. . . How is it possible to fight for the inalienable nature of the right to live by killing? How is it possible to fight for peace by war? For honesty by dishonesty? For justice by injustice? Is it not, after all, an obvious paradox? Because we believe—as do our opponents, after all—that the human right to live is the highest right, this is why we claim that the death penalty can never be justified.

And Jura says: "I realized at some point that I can only form my own point of view if I am free enough to let go of a part of my own bigotry, to allow the other side to be heard, and then draw my conclusions based on that. That was important, particularly after the war, which marked us all in some way."

In the autumn of 1994, finally, I started working differently in regular classes, too. Instead of following the official curriculum and going through the history of philosophy from Thales to Heidegger, I decided to deal with some philosophical problems that were still pressing. I conceived my classes as if they were preparations for debates. I photocopied piles of texts, sometimes in English, and the students read them in class and at home, analyzing arguments, commenting and defending or refuting them. We seldom had a formal debate in class, because there were too many students for the process to have any meaning, but the most important things I learned through debate were there. And, it seemed, they were just fine.

I continued to work with the Lasses, the program developed, things were happening all the time: debates, seminars, tournaments. In the late spring of 1995, the older girls graduated from the secondary school and went on to university. Over the summer, we held the first international debate camp. Like the first seminar, it was in Hungary, in Tata, so the first debate circle seemed to have come to its completion.

Today, Jura is about to graduate in economics, and he is a representative in the City Assembly of Zagreb. He deals in politics in a way that is different from what politicians usually do. He doesn't wear three-piece suits, and he joins citizen protests against the construction of commercial skyscrapers that the *nouveau riches* want to erect in places where old-age pensioners play chess and kids play football.

Ana graduated in philosophy and literature; she spent some time working in a school, and she is completing her professional education by studying critical thinking methodology. She is destined to spend her life teaching, but she still pretends not to have realized it completely.

Sena is a psychologist and works in a nongovernmental organization dealing with protecting and providing psychological help for molested children. She and Mac, her Macedonian husband, met in 1996 as debaters at the international debate camp in the Czech Republic; they make a great *tavče gravče*, a Macedonian traditional dish of baked beans.

Una graduated in philosophy and literature and works in the Centre for Dramatic Arts. She dyes her hair a mad red, she works in the theatre, writes and publishes articles in various cultural magazines, and seems to have stopped biting her nails before public appearances.

Seven years ago, I joined a small group of colleagues and friends who decided to found an independent school. I teach philosophy and logic and, of course, I coach the debate club.

The debate program in Croatia is today led by the Croatian Debate Association, a nongovernmental organization that brings together about five hundred high-school and university students and teachers. CDA is part of the International Debate Education Association, which links debate organizations from 27 countries with over sixty thousand high school students, ten thousand university students, and thirteen thousand teachers.

Out of the Tunnel: Romani School Desegregation

By Petya Kabakchieva, Bulgaria

I. The Quest

The mountain-valley town of Sliven, situated in the middle of Bulgaria, is the oldest industrial town in Bulgaria. People from Sliven boast that the first factory in the Balkans was opened there in 1836. Nowadays the town combines the beauty of its bourgeois past—old houses in the Viennese style—with large communist-era blocks and new commercial buildings. The town is still an industrial center. Besides its textiles and export wines, Sliven also is known for something quite different from its image as a prosperous entrepreneurial town: it is the home of one of the largest Romani neighborhoods in Bulgaria. Officially, this place is called Nadejda, or Hope. But everyone in Sliven knows it by a more common and far less optimistic name: the ghetto.

I am a sociologist, a woman in my mid-forties, and I wanted to visit Hope to see firsthand the progress of an OSI-supported NGO's program to send Romani children to study in Bulgarian schools. The program has received a great deal of praise.

The leader of the desegregation project, run by a Romani youth NGO, is Stella Kostova. Stella is a Romani woman in her mid-thirties, with iridescent eyes and an ironic smile. Her multitude of rings, necklaces, and clanging bracelets impress me, and she catches me looking at them. "Oh, these," she says. "This is a sign of love with us. The more your husband loves you, the more bracelets you have." I can't tell whether she is serious or not.

Stella sees me as just another intruder, someone else who has come to register the achievements of the project, to commiserate about the harsh conditions the Roma endure, and to leave, safe and sound, believing that he or she has fulfilled some sense of obligation. Everybody knows the

Romani issue sells well, in the literal and the metaphoric sense. Donors give a lot of money for Romani programs. It is politically correct and almost fashionable to discuss the problems of the Roma. As a result of this attention, people have the impression that Romani programs are successful and Romani living conditions are improving—that these projects are changing the world.

I tell Stella that I would like to talk with her at length. But first I want to visit the Romani neighborhood and talk with its people. I want to visit the so-called Romani school, as well as the schools where “desegregated” children study. Another skeptical smile erupts on Stella’s face. “You want to go into the ghetto? Aren’t you afraid? It isn’t particularly pleasant there.”

I explain that I have studied the problems of the Roma for quite some time and this would by no means be my first visit into a Romani neighborhood. In my opinion the problems are too serious to resolve with one, two, or ten projects. I tell her that I wonder what will happen when the desegregation project ends. What will happen with the Romani kids who are now being bused to mixed schools, the kids who have clothes and textbooks bought for them? I ask her how she plans to resolve the problem.

Stella’s face becomes grim. “All right, you go to the neighborhood, then we’ll talk. One must visit the ghetto.” She pronounces the word “ghetto” with unconcealed revulsion. “Then we’ll discuss the problems of the Roma. Only then can you understand my struggle with the ghetto, my attempt to get the children out of it, to open a new world for them, to show them that they have another choice. And this choice depends upon them.”

II. The Tunnel

As in many other places in Bulgaria, the Romani ghetto serves as a catch basin, intentionally created under socialism, to hold the Romani minority. And like many other ghettos, Hope is separated from the rest of the town, from Sliven. Here, a railroad right-of-way marks the separation, and the only way from one side to the other is through a tunnel. Darkness fills this tunnel, day or night, summer or winter, and when you pass through it, you seem to enter a different world. Some Roma of Hope, it seems, have never stepped through the darkness into the world beyond. Some

Romani children now bused to schools in Sliven had never before crossed all the way through the tunnel, down the road, and into the center of town. They had never set foot on its streets.

The Roma tell many stories about the tunnel. In their eyes, it is a horrible place. A fat man with a moustache tells me that he had stopped his kid from going to classes in Sliven after just the first grade, because somewhere around the tunnel two Romani children had been run over by a car as they were walking alone to school. The sight had been horrifying. The shocked father could no longer afford to let his son go unattended to school, being afraid that the same could happen to him.

Stella tells me that two days before we met yet another horrible incident had taken place in the tunnel. A two-year-old Romani child crawled out of his home in the middle of the night. (I would soon understand how such a thing could happen; the child had literally crawled out of the hovel where he lived, a place with no doors or windows, just a hole to get in and out.) The child got lost in the neighborhood and wandered into the tunnel. Then he tripped down some stairs in the dark and fell unconscious in the chilly night with broken limbs and a head injury. The first Roma going to work in the morning found him, still alive, and the child was taken to the hospital and saved.

One of the most famous stories in the ghetto is the following: During local elections in the fall of 2003, thugs who supported the mayor from the Bulgarian Socialist Party (the former Communist Party) surrounded a group of Roma in the tunnel and started beating them. Their message was clearly to frighten the Roma, all of them, to keep them from voting for the candidate from the other party. When the word spread, other Roma rushed in from the ghetto and joined the fight. In the darkness, for the first time, they defied the otherwise all-powerful thugs. The rumble in the tunnel turned into an epic battle and the opposition party candidate won the mayoral election. "For us," one of the Roma said, "this victory was very important, because we understood that important things could depend on us, even though we are from the ghetto. Can you imagine? We could fight even the thugs, as long as we decided to do so." Victory in the battle of the tunnel somehow opened up the ghetto to the world "over there."

This is important, because I found that for most inhabitants of the ghetto the world "over there" is an unknown. The Roma see the tracks as a kind of fortress wall, and the tunnel as a kind of gate, a portal that separates their refuge—their ghetto—from the frightening and chaotic world

beyond. Who knows what will happen “over there” to little Romani kids? Because the first thing that strikes you after emerging from the tunnel in the Romani neighborhood is the horde of children—hundreds of children, flocks of children—wandering in the streets unattended, playing, running, or looking at you with no worry whatsoever. They feel safe here. On this side of the tunnel, they feel protected.

III. The Ghetto

The ghetto is a small town, almost an autonomous settlement. Stella says its inhabitants number anywhere between fourteen thousand and twenty thousand. (It is commonplace to account for Roma with wild estimates. The figures do not seem to matter much to the authorities who make statistics. What seems important to them is an attitude: “There are too many Gypsies.” As a matter of fact many of the Roma are not registered and do not figure in the official lists.)

The ghetto smells like smoke. Like fire. It also smells like greasy *mekitsi*, a deep-fried pastry. In some places small piglets run around, and with the piglets comes another smell. When the nose takes it all in, the smell of the ghetto is the smell of an ailing organism.

The ghetto has its own internal pecking order. It has common areas, including a square with a small market, around which stand the newest, most solidly built houses. Farther away, just beyond the fence of the local distillery, is the poorest section, a warren of hovels, dugouts, and basements, where thousands of people are crammed together like fish in a dented, rusting can.

The Roma call some of their own the Turks, because they are Muslims. These Roma are the most well-to-do. Their houses are relatively big, and they stand on the ghetto’s wider, paved streets. Many of them have satellite dishes. Most of the coffee shops and small retail stores are also situated in their corner of the ghetto. Many of the Muslim Roma make their living trading goods. They constantly travel to Turkey and back, with cars weighed down with rugs, electronics, and clothing. The Turks emigrate more often than the other Roma. A teacher from the Romani school told me that the children from this Romani subgroup are the most diligent in school and their parents value education the most. The next group of well-to-do Roma are the musicians, those who make their living by playing and singing at Romani festivities and weddings. Their

children also attend school regularly, and there are even university graduates among them.

The section of Hope where conditions are worst belongs to a group the Roma call “the naked ones.” These people, the ones Stella’s desegregation project is trying to help, have nothing: no proper houses, no belongings, practically no clothes. The area where they live consists of crude, crowded shelters: basements, dugouts, hovels, linked by a chaos of pathways carrying the bustle of thousands of people. Life is communal here and it seems no private space exists. Most of the hovels have no doors or windows; the gaping holes of the dugouts open directly onto the street. The community is horizontal, not vertical. Not only because there are no tall houses, but also because none of the shelters have real roofs. On the packed, half-finished cement slabs of some of the houses, life goes on just as it does in the street: people walk around, dogs and hens wander about, children play, women hang out their laundry. The dividing lines between the different homes are merely figurative, so are the boundaries between the homes and the pathways. Here *mekitsi* are fried in the open and sold directly from the frying pan, which is placed in the mud. Here the clamor of playing children mingles with the hacking coughs of ailing old people within the dugouts. Here the street is the real home.

The street is where people chat, perform everyday activities, run a business, play. The actual home, the private space, is the hearth or the stove in the sleeping hole, the bare earth or the floor where Roma huddle for a while during the night to warm themselves and each other.

All around run small piglets, hens, cats, and dogs, extremely calm and friendly, all used to the thousands of people at whose feet they scuttle. The dogs are not watchdogs; they are free toys for the kids who hang on to them simply because they have no other toys.

Some of the children wear more clothes, others less. Around me wanders a boy of two or three with only a shirt on his back and mud-splattered boots on his feet; he wears no pants, not even underpants. It is February. Next to him a girl looks at me with curiosity. Her hair is henna-dyed, her feet clad only in unmatching socks, her tiny body garbed in a T-shirt and something like jogging pants, which are too short to cover her naked legs.

Suddenly, I remember Stella Kostova’s words: “Every time I go to the ghetto, I become furious with rage. Most of the people there have never left it. They are afraid, they say. They have grown accustomed to this way of life, they say. But why do the children have to follow this way of

life, why deprive them of any choice to be different? I want to take the kids out and show them the other world, let them meet Bulgarian children, let them clash with this other reality, if need be. I know it's difficult for them but they have to learn to struggle, take responsibility, reach out for something, leave the ghetto, and take their own road. And it's not about giving them clothes, snacks, or textbooks. I wish I could make them want to go to school even if they don't have textbooks. I want them to fight for themselves."

IV. Educating "the Naked Ones"

As soon as my Romani companions and I enter the neighborhood, we are surrounded by people who, sometimes with hostility, other times out of curiosity, want to know why we have come. I explain that I have come to talk with them about the education of their children. "Oh, is it about Stella's project?" a man asks rather impolitely. I tell him and the others that I just want to ask them whether the kids go to school, if yes to which school, and if no why? And of course, what do they think about the project? A crowd gathers. People start shouting. An evangelical preacher appears and leads us to a small plain hall of sorts, with twenty or so chairs and a wooden cross in front. It turns out to be a church. I continue the discussion with those who manage to squeeze in.

"How can I send him to school in these clothes and with no shoes on his feet? Here it is alright even if he runs around naked. But in the school . . ." says a middle-aged woman.

"He is just fine here, he runs, he plays, why should I trouble him with studies?" says a middle-aged man.

"This is total crap. Our kids should be educated so that they can get out of this misery. Stella is completely right. No Romani schools should exist. Our kids should study together with Bulgarian kids in normal schools," says a man in his thirties.

"Well, I am afraid to let them go to school. They will be beaten up and mocked there. The girl could be raped or stolen," says a worn-out woman who could easily be thirty or fifty.

"Yeah, but I stopped my girl from going to school when she started maturing at thirteen, I had her married at fifteen, and now look at her—she is unhappy, although she has a baby. She tells me: 'Dad, I had to continue studying. Now what am I supposed to do with this sixth grade edu-

cation I have? Only raise babies?’ And I feel sorry, I think I made a mistake. So I have left her sisters in school to study as high as they can reach,” says a man in his forties.

“No Romani schools—out of the ghetto, with the Bulgarian kids! I graduated from the Romani school, and I am perfectly aware how much I know. And when I tell people which school I graduated, I have no chance at all of finding work,” says a boy of about eighteen.

And on and on:

“I agree that they should study, but here in our Romani school. They are close here, nobody threatens them, and they are always within sight.”

“I’ve seen Romani school graduates writing job applications—they are totally illiterate. I do not know how they give them marks in this school. Out of the ghetto, this is where they should study, together with the Bulgarian kids,” the preacher adds.

V. The Yard of School No. 6: Ziumbiulka and Ani

The girl with the beautiful name Ziumbiulka (Hyacinth) is eleven years old. She attends School No. 6, the Romani School in Hope, or she seems to, anyway. I meet her in the schoolyard. For the two hours that I spend talking to different children and teachers, Ziumbiulka never enters the classroom.

She chooses to come to us as we talk to the school guard. She looks at us somewhat oddly: from the side and never in the eyes. Her complexion is rather light, not tawny; her hair seems artificial, with an auburn-reddish color that may have been the result of a botched attempt to dye it blonde. She looks young, but her face seems somewhat wrinkled. Ziumbiulka wears cheap sneakers, patterned jeans, a yellow sweater, and a short leopard-spotted coat. Her older sister, Ani, is in seventh grade. The two sisters obviously love each other very much. During the breaks the older one runs out and talks to Ziumbiulka about something very serious and important. They clearly differ in character and in diligence. The older sister comes out only at recess and is quite strict in her studies, while the younger stays in the schoolyard all the time.

I ask Ziumbiulka why she isn’t in class. “Don’t you like school?”

Ziumbiulka declares that she doesn’t, and adds that she wants to go home and never come back again. Then she gives a slight smile.

“Why don’t you want to come here?”

The girl mixes up all kinds of explanations. She says she has to stay at home and take care of her little brothers who still do not go to school. She has two brothers and three sisters. The oldest sister has graduated eighth grade; the second one, the one that I saw, studies in the same school. Her father’s parents also live in the household, so I ask her why she has to be the one to take care of the little ones.

“Because my father is unemployed and is looking for a job,” she says.

“Don’t you have a mother?”

“I do. She is unemployed, too.”

I ask her then why doesn’t her mother take care of her brothers. Ziumbiulka gets confused and admits that it is her mother who looks after the little ones. Nobody really makes her stay at home, she is the one who doesn’t want to go to school.

“Don’t your parents force you to go? Don’t they scold you?”

The girl admits that they scold her and that her father beats her and kicks her out of bed in the morning when she doesn’t want to go to school. It is obvious that her parents insist that she attends classes, and I wonder whether the reason for this is the knowledge Ziumbiulka might acquire, or the social security benefits and child allowances parents would otherwise lose if she stopped attending school. It is clear that neither the parents nor poverty prevent Ziumbiulka from attending classes, since her two sisters go to school and one of them has even completed basic education.

The girl sighs and tries another explanation.

“Look at my clothes. I have no nice clothes and shoes to wear.”

The children who play in the schoolyard, however, are not better dressed. I reassure her that she looks fine and she becomes silent in assent.

Then the psychological excuses come.

“I don’t like being in school. I don’t find it interesting.”

“Well, isn’t there at least one subject that you like: physical education or music?”

“No, I don’t like PE, either. I want to stay at home.”

“And what would you do all day at home?”

“I don’t know. I’ll just play.”

“Don’t you think it is better here in school, after all? There are so many children around to play with. Wouldn’t it be nice if you knew arithmetic, if you could write and read?”

“No, it wouldn’t. Home is better.”

“And when you grow up wouldn’t it be necessary for you to be educated?”

“No!” she says emphatically. “I’ll raise children and I’ll go to town to collect stuff.” She clearly means scraps that can be recycled.

Ani appears. Quite a different character. Short, cleaner, with braided hair, rather tawny but with blue eyes. She has moles on her cheeks and smiles all the time. She decides to join the conversation.

“I like to go to school. It’s nice to learn, but I don’t want to study here.”

“Why not?”

“Well, the school isn’t good. There is nothing here; you see how bare it is. Our desks are old and broken. Other schools have computers; here—nothing. It’s so dirty. And it isn’t interesting at all. At all! The teachers are no good. It’s also very noisy.” Ani has a point. Children chase one another around the schoolyard. They scream. They hit each other.

“How do you mean the teachers are no good?”

“They shout at us, they don’t teach us. We know nothing.”

Asked whether she likes any particular subject, Ani singles out mathematics and physical education. But she wants to go to another school—in the center of the town. She doesn’t say “in a Bulgarian school,” but a school “in the center.” I ask her whether this is because some schools provide breakfast to the students.

“I’ll buy breakfast myself,” she says. “I can buy a muffin. I just want to be in a better place, one that is cleaner.” And again she adds, “It isn’t interesting here.”

Ziumbiulka breaks into the conversation again:

“And other children beat us up—in class, in the hallways, in the schoolyard. Children here are awful. They treat me really, really bad. And the cleaning ladies hit me and chase me. Teachers and the headmistress are no good either. They always scold me. I want home.”

Then just as suddenly Ziumbiulka shuts up and looks embarrassed. It turns out that a teacher has come up to us.

A group of boys, who until now have only been watching us and listening to the conversation, tries to provoke an incident.

“Miss, Ziumbiulka said that you were hitting her and you’re very bad,” one of the boys tattles.

I try explaining that this is not true.

“It doesn’t matter what Ziumbiulka has said,” the teacher answers. “Even if she has really said this about me, I couldn’t care less. Ziumbiulka

had better worry about herself. She should rather tell you that she knows nothing and has learned nothing because she is so lazy. She is bone lazy, too lazy to sit at her desk, even too lazy to reply when I ask her a question. She just looks and utters no word. She doesn't write when other students do tests. She doesn't read. This is the laziest person I have ever seen. Isn't it so, Ziumbiulka? Tell her. This is the reason for everything. No other causes exist. Look how her sister studies three grades ahead of her and how well she's doing. And this one is completely the opposite. I can't believe they come from the same family. I've told her parents so many times, but to no avail. As if she's from another world."

Ziumbiulka hangs her head down and remains silent.

I ask the teacher how she passes from one grade to another, when she's lazy and knows nothing.

"We give her a passing mark and she passes without learning a thing. That's how."

Then the teacher excuses herself, saying that she has to return to her class. Meanwhile, Ani has also gone back into the school building. Ziumbiulka runs after her, without saying goodbye.

VI. Desegregation Project, Seen from the Ghetto

We continue our walk, surrounded by kids. Some children are jumping rope; others are chasing piglets and still others, the hens; some are running on the cement slabs. A swell of children rising up everywhere.

Suddenly a different group of about twenty kids appears: boys and girls, seven- or eight-year-olds, with small sacks on their backs. They are going to school led by a young Romani woman in jeans and a leather jacket—the assistant teacher, I am told. The children, all of them wearing the same orange jackets and brown men's shoes, have a focused look on their faces and seem strangely uniform against the background of motley misery. "They are dressed with our project's money," proudly announces the coordinator who accompanies me.

About thirty coordinators of the Romani youth organization work in this corner of Hope. The coordinators accompany the kids to school and back, transporting them in buses. They monitor the children's behavior in class. They make sure all homework is done. According to Nicky and Julian, the two coordinators who walk the neighborhood with me, they

also perform other, rather peculiar, functions. Before school, they take the kids from home, or from the streets that are their homes, to Stella Kostova's office, where the children who haven't bathed can wash. They make sure the kids wear the clothes that have been provided. They check to see whether the clothes are clean. They examine the children's hair for lice.

"One of the conditions for riding on the school bus is that the kids be tidy and clean, and the mothers do their best," says Nicky. I wonder where the mothers bathe the children. "They heat water in a cauldron over the fire and pour it over them in a trough." I shiver at the thought of the naked kids in the trough, and I suddenly realize that something so natural to me, like bathing, is a risky endeavor here. "No problem," Nicky says, as if he had read my thoughts. "The children are seasoned. Look how lightly dressed they are; this is how they walk around in winter—with a shirt and a pair of socks."

Nicky is twenty years old, he has graduated from a vocational school in construction and is now studying economics at a private college in Sliven. He is from the "Bulgarian" Roma. His parents are literate and have always had jobs. He has never lived in the ghetto, only in Bulgarian neighborhoods, and he has always studied in Bulgarian schools. He is well dressed and eager to succeed. He is also a fervent supporter of desegregation. At a meeting with the headmistress of the Roma-only school, the two of them exchanged caustic remarks on the quality of education the Romani kids were getting and whether the school's teachers even marked absentees.

"Why should you be more tolerant of the kids only because they are Roma?" Nicky asked. "You should treat them just as you would treat Bulgarian children. You should give them poor marks if they are unprepared. You shouldn't let them pass to a higher grade. No lenience at all. Lenience is detrimental."

The headmistress of the Romani school, a woman in her forties with a rather worn-out look on her face, replied: "How can we give them poor marks. If we do, they will never come to school again. After all, it is better here than in the neighborhood."

Nicky hates the ghetto. "Is it fair for these kids to live like this? Is it? If you ask me, this whole place should be torn down and the people put in decent homes in the Bulgarian neighborhoods." The inhabitants of the ghetto probably feel his disdain for their way of life. They treat Nicky coldly, and even with hostility. He is not one of their own.

Julian, who is in his late forties, was chosen to coordinate the desegregation project because he comes from this part of the ghetto and everybody knows and trusts him. He has three kids of his own. "Two of them are already beyond school age and are not very literate," he says, "but the third, the small one, is simply great. He likes to study very much, but what he likes most is to play computer games."

Julian is worried that when the project ends and the municipality starts appointing assistant teachers, he will be dismissed because he has only a primary-school education and does not qualify for such a position. Assistant teachers have to be Roma with at least secondary education. They also undergo special training, the first round of which starts in the spring. "I'm here because people know me and trust me. And I am perfectly capable of helping a first grader," notes Julian with frustration in his voice. It is true that he is well known in the neighborhood. People stop him in the street to ask him questions. Some insist that he get their children in the program: "I want you to include my kid, too. What does it matter if he is eight years old? He hasn't been to first grade."

The program is targeted to small children, to future first graders who go to a preparatory class first. The older ones attending the program are now in the third grade. The children are spread out among the twelve Bulgarian schools in Sliven, five in each class. "Why five?" I ask. "They wouldn't accept more. Only five." The figure "five" keeps coming up in all conversations about Romani kids studying in Bulgarian schools. "No more than five" is an unwritten rule, but it is strictly followed. So the minority remains a minority.

In the three years since the project was started, the twelve Bulgarian schools have taken in 354 Romani kids, Julian tells me.

"Aren't there any dropouts?"

"Well, there are. The 354 are those who stayed in school."

"How many dropouts per year do you have and why do they drop out?"

"I think twenty or so, but I can't really say why they drop out. Probably they have problems adjusting."

"What are the other conditions for participating in the program, apart from the requirement that kids be six or seven when they start?"

"They should also do well in school."

"Okay, but how do you select them in the first place?"

"Well, we get those who want to join. The parents come to us and tell us that they want their kid to go to a Bulgarian school. That is how we do it."

“And what about the older ones who do not go to school? Those who have missed the opportunity to enter first grade?”

“We cannot help everybody, you see.”

I gaze once again at the swarming world of the ghetto, and I wonder where a child can find a quiet place to sit and prepare lessons. In this communal way of life, where privacy seems out of the question, each individual effort is incomprehensible and each resistance against the environment is heroic. But nevertheless somewhere around here on the cement slab fragments, in the hovels and dugouts, some kids manage to read their primers and go over their lessons.

How do the children who attend Bulgarian schools themselves reconcile their two worlds: the ghetto and the world through the tunnel? Which world would they choose to stay in?

VII. Stella Kostova

After two days of meeting people in the neighborhood, Stella Kostova finally agrees to talk.

“You saw, didn’t you? You saw how things are over there,” she says. “You saw how the Roma in the ghetto live: in total resignation, having abandoned themselves to fate. They have to cease considering themselves victims, they have to take their fate in their own hands. This is what I want to achieve. And the best solution for this is education. The issue is not only to teach the kids to read and write; the issue is to make them struggle and not acquiesce. And this is why I tell their mothers: ‘You may have nothing to eat, but you will find soap, you’ll clean the child up, and you’ll send him to school, so that one day he can leave this neighborhood and the misery and submission with which you’ve lived all your life, and not be ashamed of being a Roma. You have to give your child a choice.’ And they tell me: ‘You are not from around here. You have no idea how difficult it is to get out of the ghetto.’”

“Where are you from?” I ask.

“I have never lived there. I come from the upper Romani neighborhood, from a family of musicians. In our family, we always spoke Romany, we always sang our songs, even though during socialism they wanted to eliminate cultural differences and we were forbidden to speak our language. We always knew the Romani folklore. I’ve played the piano ever since I was a kid. I knew Vassil Chaprazov since I was a girl, because

he was a friend of my parents. In 1979 he established the first underground Romani organization. The communist authorities didn't like this and Vassil decided to go and work in the Soviet Union for awhile. After 1989 he came back and we established the Democratic Roma Union."

"Did you attend a Bulgarian school? Did you face any problems there?"

"Yes, I went to a Bulgarian school. I've always been an excellent student. Well, in high school they once gave me only a passing mark on an essay on Botev's poetry. And I like Botev, I think he is the greatest Bulgarian poet, and I wrote the essay with love. But the teacher said, 'I just can't give more than a passing mark to a Gypsy on an essay on Botev.' This really hurt me. That was when I showed defiance for the first time. I said I didn't agree with his assessment and left the classroom, slamming the door and calling the teacher a fool. They wanted to expel me after this incident and I was in the final year of high school. But my class teacher was a very decent person and stood up for me.

"After 1989 I first went into politics, but people in politics are very fragmented and everyone cares most of all for him- or herself. So I decided to found this Romani nongovernmental organization. I gradually learned how to develop projects."

"Tell me something about your kids."

"The kids came rather late. I had already gone into politics. By the way, precisely because they knew me around town as a Romani activist, they put me in a room with Bulgarian women when I gave birth. Did you know that Romani women are placed separately from Bulgarian women? Even in the maternity wards they divide us on ethnic grounds. But they didn't dare to do that with me. I had already made a name. They knew me and didn't dare. And seeing this, I once again realized that you have to prove yourself, you have to be educated, be a person with an attitude in order to be acknowledged as a citizen with equal rights. That is why I set my mind to taking our children out of the ghettos, so that they could prove what they are capable of and learn to be competitive. And this is achieved through education.

"And the 'naked ones,' what chances do they have? That is why I work with the poorest children. I know that some people in the ghetto don't like me. They feel I create a division among them because I choose some kids and not others. This is true, but they have to realize that differences exist, that there is competition, and they have to struggle to succeed. Those kids who have gotten out of the ghetto and have become

conscious of what they want to become, would still want to study, even if the project is terminated.

“To me desegregation does not mean assimilation; it means equality and fair competition. Our kids should know our language, our folklore, and our history—and be proud. And Bulgarian children should also learn some of these things because we are part of the Bulgarian nation. When you read Bulgarian history, it is as if we don’t exist, as if we are not part of that history. Do you know when our people came to these lands? Do you know who are the most famous Roma? Or how our songs sound? Our kids should know these things and be proud of them, as should Bulgarian kids.

“So that’s about it. I am against the ghetto, because Roma there are humiliated and stripped of their rights. I think that all public institutions there should be relocated elsewhere—the clinic, the town hall, the social services. I even thought that the ghetto should be demolished. Well, I am not as radical as I used to be. I was even against the Romani school because this is yet another way to reinforce the ghetto. Now I realize that at this stage it is necessary. We just can’t put all Romani kids in Bulgarian schools yet. But the quality of education should be improved there and children should be required to study as in any other school.

“Getting out of the ghetto is the only right way, even if the children are mocked, even if it is difficult. They have to pass through the tunnel in order to fight it.”

Hard Waking Up

By Božena Jelušić, Montenegro

Prologue

“My name is Ahmed Nuruddin. It was given to me and I took what was offered with pride. But now, after a great many years which have grown on me like skin, I think about it with wonder and sometimes with a sneer, since calling oneself ‘Light of Faith’ evinces an arrogance that I have never felt and of which I am now somewhat ashamed. How am I a light? And how have I been enlightened? By knowledge? By higher teaching? By a pure heart? By the true path? By freedom from doubt? Everything has been cast into doubt and now I am nothing but Ahmed, neither sheikh nor Nuruddin. Everything has fallen from me, like a robe or a suit of armor, and all that remains is what was at the beginning, naked skin and naked man.”

Meša Selimović: *Death and the Dervish*¹

I. In the old Yugoslavia (1971–19**)

The Pupil

I received my education in socialist Yugoslavia during the 1970s. At the entrance to my school, the teachers used to send home students whose hair was longer than that expected of a young socialist. In school, we

¹ Meša Selimović (1996): *Death and the Dervish*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois, p. 4.

were regularly served up our own American dream, with a socialist aura. I had never wondered why the birthday of our president for life was a national holiday. Tito's birthday came in the springtime. Every May thousands of flower blossoms perished under the feet of schoolchildren who ran to give him a customary youth baton. The future was a linear movement toward a perfect society.

Still, even now it seems to me that mine was a relatively lucky generation—at a safe distance between the East and West, with one war sufficiently far behind us, and the other far ahead.

The Teacher

I started teaching literature in 1980. In the spring of the same year our president died. In the classroom, however, I was welcomed by his photo on the wall, while all gatherings ended with the song “Comrade Tito, we solemnly swear not to stray from your path.”

During my university studies the school system was reformed, but the new curriculum once again reflected the dominant ideology. A third of the third-year literature syllabus was devoted to writings created during the five-year period of the war and our revolution; the rest of contemporary literature was jammed into the remaining time. Still, many of the readings were quite good and, as a rule, literature was a subject students liked. Published in 1966, the novel *Death and the Dervish* by Meša Selimović was included in the syllabus. Although rather extensive, the novel fascinated the teachers and students alike.

Despite the fact that he came from the family of a wealthy goldsmith, Selimović was a communist, not because he was poor, but because he was willing to share with others. During the war, his own brother, also a communist, was executed by a communist firing squad for an alleged theft. There was no trial. Prior to his execution, the brother sent Meša a message insisting he was not guilty. Meša Selimović remained a communist. It is hard to resist the impression that Selimović's *Death and the Dervish* was written in blood, although the action is set in the past and the hero is a dervish. The novel opens with a scene that shows the reluctance of the main protagonist, the dervish Ahmed Nuruddin, to rescue his own imprisoned brother, which would have meant abandoning the comfortable security of his faith and rising up in rebellion. Later in the novel, Nuruddin seizes power, but he resorts to all the same mechanisms that had ruined his own brother.

During one of my classes, a student recognized in the novel his own father, a blind executor of orders coming from those in power, anxious about his own position. “The teacher certainly didn’t have your father in mind,” the boy’s mother comforted him. She later told the story to me as a good joke. I laughed, too. But I was deadly serious. I wondered what role I had played in the boy’s life—Socrates or Mephistopheles.

One of my lessons was attended by the school headmaster, who was curious about how I was teaching *Death and the Dervish*. I organized the class to be like a trial of the dervish Ahmed Nuruddin. There was a prosecution case, and then the defense, and the students debated whether he was a hero or not. The classroom sparkled with tension. But at the end, the headmaster was adamant: “You mustn’t do this, you’re confusing them. Ahmed is a hero, not an antihero. Don’t you think he’s a victim of the system? You mustn’t give students such a stark choice. After all, tell them one or the other, but by no means both.”

I did not understand why he held such an opinion. More often than not, he had been critical of what was going on in our society. In fact, he had been one of only a few people who had defended a student who could have suffered serious consequences for an act of mischief that turned into “an accident.” Intent on playing a cruel joke on a history teacher, some students had brought eggs to school. In a moment of turmoil, a tossed egg splattered over Tito’s photograph. The press reported that a serious incident had taken place. Our whole town was in a state of agitation. A shadow of suspicion fell over the accused student’s entire family. I was on the committee that looked into the matter. We managed to get the student off by saying he had not been aiming at Tito’s photograph, but at the teacher. It was a defining moment, however, for it showed we no longer believed that the picture was sacrosanct, something to be protected at all cost, particularly not at the expense of a student. In so doing, however, we accepted without complaint that the egg was thrown at one of our own, the teacher.

At that time, in my son’s primary school spelling book, the letter M was illustrated by the word “mother,” and T was illustrated by “Tito.”

The Devil’s Work

It was during the 1990s that I first participated in the creation of the new language and literature curricula. An elderly member of the committee was insistent that the syllabus should include all Russian realists—

thousands of pages of Pushkin, Lermontov, Gogol, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov. His proposal was not accepted, but the resulting curricula were so packed with content that fourth-year students had to read forty-eight pages a day if they wanted to cover the whole literature syllabus. This resulted in a kind of “skimming through” the syllabus, and still, even after reading so many words, it was commonplace for students not to have a single thought of their own.

Literature, of course, was only one of the required courses. The massive amount of information required in all the other subjects of the curricula became a kind of dungeon. The teachers and students became trapped within it, without actually possessing it. The worst illusion was that it was possible to master it. One student made the absurdity clear when he answered a test question with only one sentence. “At the beginning of the 20th century many literary movements appeared: expressionism, surrealism, futurism, and fascism.”

There were, of course, exceptional students, and the information-packed curricula offered them a great deal. But even some of them misled me, and maybe I should have asked myself why we found it necessary to force young people to follow our own path, and re-experience what we had experienced. The best students, however, most frequently became outsiders in a society that increasingly reflected the bad students’ revenge: easily acquired wealth and the expensive cars, clothes, and entertainment that negated the impact of school and teachers to the point of nonexistence. The school system as a whole was somehow being demolished from within. School was losing its appeal, and it was happening simultaneously with the demolition of the country itself.

Grading was becoming increasingly difficult. The exam periods, the time in which we evaluated the students’ overall performance, were turning into nightmares. It was obvious that maybe five out of, say, thirty students in a class were able to meet the requirements of the syllabus. Instead of changing the system, we started changing failing marks into passing ones. In no time, praise and reward and punishment—and the whole school system itself—became devoid of any meaning.

Uneducated people and even people with purchased degrees were starting to acquire undreamt-of wealth and social power. It wasn’t the first time this had happened. Under the previous regime, too, honorary doctorates were conferred upon people lacking proper education. And now one of the worst students my school had turned out managed to occupy the leading position in one of Montenegro’s most strategically im-

portant organizations. On board a plane, he once thanked his old English teacher for failing to make him take school seriously. In cases like this, teachers were supposed to hand out low grades and disciplinary measures that would obstruct the advancement of young people for whom school had long been unsuited. A graffito on a school wall expressed the reality: "It's your problem that you went to school and have low pay now." A student of mine once asked: "Why do I have to read *The Brothers Karamazov*? My dad's never read anything, and he's got four houses!" (In a certain way, I understood him. After all, however significant, the novel had a total of one thousand pages of text.) In the biggest tourist company in Montenegro, cleaners went on strike because of low wages. They were warned that their pay was higher than the pay of teachers. Their reply was very eloquent, "Don't compare us with them!"

The result was a lowering of the quality of the teachers. Mixed together with ardent lovers of the profession, the new, low-quality teachers passed unnoticed in the beginning, but eventually that would destroy the profession. For in a hierarchical institution such as a school, even these teachers had a voice and had to be heard, though they had nothing to say. A graffito on a wall in the vicinity of my school said: "When I'm gone, I'm gone; when I'm here, I'd better be gone." The student who wrote this probably had in mind his own lack of interest and inactivity in class. The graffito, however, spoke more of us, the teachers.

It was difficult to convince the students that education was in fact meaningful. A new vocation now appeared—currency dealing. Mostly uneducated, currency dealers made profits on our hyperinflation, acquiring overnight what teachers were unable to earn for years. Time did not work to the teachers' advantage, either. "A teacher can be a dealer, but a dealer can never be a teacher," I would say to my students. This used to make them brood over the odd logic. I brooded over it, too. Some of my colleagues were indeed dabbling in this business.

The most significant defense mechanism and remedy for each doubt was the stereotypical view that our students abroad achieved remarkable results. We never mentioned the others, the ones who went abroad and did not achieve remarkable results, nor did we wonder what driving force it was that led a young person to succeed in a new environment. We only listened to the stories of the best—the failures seemed to have disappeared somewhere.

II. Reform in Montenegro after the Year 2000

Doubt

In 1999 I received Montenegro's highest award for achievement in education. But I doubted more than ever what I was doing, even though I would never have changed my underpaid job for something else. Deep inside I believed that ten years earlier I had been a better teacher. It never occurred to me that this had something to do with the increasingly extensive school curricula, even though I was warned by students, "Why don't we carry on reading Selimović instead of these boring poets?" they asked. The students invited me to stop so that we could think together. "We've all read Andrić. Let's study him for the rest of the term." They saw that school control was not rigorous. They proposed deception, while I was guarding the curriculum that was deceiving them.

For years we had been creating regulations that hung somewhere above students' heads and focused on education as a concept and not upon the students themselves. In the end a nasty reaction took place: The system grew fat. We, the educators, had been reduced to the point of non-existence. And the students found their own way—they stayed away from classes. Truancy became the major problem. Students did not play hooky just to avoid low grades; they stayed away from school because they were bored. Once again teachers had to accept that they deserved to "have eggs thrown at them."

I took comfort in student stories comparing Montenegro's school system favorably with schools elsewhere in the world. Now I know, however, that searching for justification in the success of students who went abroad was only an attempt to defend ourselves. Oddly enough, it seemed to me that I was experiencing the story of Selimović's dervish, as well. I viewed Nuruddin as an antihero for seeking to maintain his balanced world, and here I was seeking a way to preserve my own world. For the stories about students who excelled abroad could by no means have provided the right answer, as these same students were also the best in Montenegro. They merely served to give us proof that our curriculum was immaculate.

I was proud. In an American school one of my students, a girl named Radmila, used her knowledge of Kafka in an analysis of Solzhenitsyn. The American teacher of world literature asked if Kafka was a poet or novelist. (I was also appalled by the fact that the brochure for Radmila's

school in America stressed that it was located close to a shopping mall.) Amazed by her knowledge, the teacher made some inquiries into whether there were any possibilities of student exchange so that her children could spend some time in Yugoslavia. Due to the sanctions imposed against our country, there were no student exchanges available. Even if there had been, I am not sure if I would have recommended that to her, for Radmila was the only pupil in her class capable of such an analysis: the remaining twenty-nine would not have been able to make it.

I witnessed a heated discussion between two parents. One of them, a rather well-off man, had had enough money to educate his children in America. They completed school early and started to work and earn money much sooner than was usual in our country, so his thirty-year-old son was already a wealthy man. He held that our children were overprotected by their parents and that our school system drove them away from work. The other parent, a university professor, defended the system and the knowledge acquired here. Finally, she said, "What else could we have offered them in the last fifteen years?" I understood her perfectly. In the years of civil war and sanctions, circumstances that left us little opportunity to offer anything else, we tried to offer our children the spiritual values we believed in. We did more for them than we should have, trying to protect them. And it appears that we did not manage to protect them.

In 1999 I was not yet familiar with the fact that the decision to introduce reform had already been made.

Recognition

In the autumn of 2000, the minister of education offered me the leading role in the media campaign accompanying the school reform effort. The decision to launch the media campaign had been prompted by insufficient interest and readiness of citizens to take part in reform.

A "hard-core teacher" like myself could be nothing but thrilled by the fact that now Montenegrins responding to a poll gave members of the medical profession a high grade of 4.5 while reserving the next two places for teachers (3.4) and priests (3.2). Trailing behind were business people, judges, people in entertainment and journalists; and the last three places were reserved for the customs officials, politicians, and police officers. My delight at the survey results soon ebbed, for I knew that more than ever teachers were on the margins of our society. Someone was being deceived here.

I was satisfied with my own work with students, but dissatisfied with school as a whole. While I felt good in my classes, in the staff room I was faced with the destruction of teachers' professionalism. In order to survive, teachers were working as booking agents for seaside resorts, as taxi drivers, sales persons, and accountants. Even worse, they gave private lessons in which they were totally different people: approachable and willing to teach children how to study. It was only those who had other sources of income, who viewed teaching as a dear and expensive hobby, who could work in school in a relaxed manner. And these were few.

The multitude of problems showed up in the course of my own children's education, and one of them delivered a crushing remark: the teachers were indifferent to their performance and knowledge. Answering questions in a geography class, my daughter followed the logic of a map and reasoned her way to an answer. She got a mark lower than that of a friend who simply memorized the material but was incapable of using the map. My daughter subsequently started learning units by heart, too. She was very indignant, "You know what, as soon as I get my grade, I'm gonna forget everything." My son had similar experiences at university studies. The only difference was that each student in electrical engineering was expected to reinvent electricity, even if that meant staying in school for twenty years.

Teaching is a beautiful and dangerous profession, and the teacher can be a "small god" whom students must obey. Self-satisfaction arrives unnoticed and it is as comfortable as a worn-out glove. Sensitivity to problems is heightened when they are observed from the other side, for example through the eyes of our own children. My ivory tower was slowly tumbling down.

All this was partially my fault, too, or the fault of all those who confused the pleasure in their own classes with the system that, like some defective machine, was spinning around them pointlessly. I suddenly realized that change, no matter what form it would take, was inevitable and necessary.

Book of Changes

I had always been excited by the beginning of a new academic year, by the faces and attitudes of young people, cheerful, unruly, and unrestrained. At these times, I would often think of an office where I might

have spent my working life: a few people at adjacent desks and petty acts of office malice. I was thankful not to be trapped there. At school, I had many more reasons to feel excited. I was starting anew, finding a new beginning.

I finally saw school from a different perspective. What I had been doing for years was not a failure, but it was beginning to look more and more like a future failure.

My school organized discussions about the *Book of Changes*, the main document of Montenegro's education reform, which was supposed to establish a new vision of school focusing on students themselves or, rather, on the acquisition of skills that would allow them to proceed with further education on their own. The other problems the Montenegrin educational system was facing, and particularly the impoverishment of teachers and schools, were discussed more than the professional issues. Teachers expressed indignation: "What do they want now? Are they suggesting that we work harder, when our pay is smaller and smaller?" The teachers were supposed to read piles of materials and deal with them in depth. Besides, certain ministry representatives were so dull and unconvincing that the mere idea of reform coming "from their mouths" seemed unappealing. It was in this atmosphere, devoid of true criticism and genuine immersion in the issue by a large number of concerned people, that the *Book of Changes* had been adopted as the fundamental document of Montenegrin reform. The prerequisite for Montenegrin reform was a consensus on all important issues. Everyone was really given a chance to participate, but only the assigned team did.

Teachers' Strike

At the height of the reform process a general teachers' strike took place. For one whole term, students attended shortened classes. The content requirements, however, remained the same. The strike divided the teachers. Most approved of the strike. I was sick and tired of those explaining how, in fact, the strike was working to the students' advantage, because twenty-five minutes per class period, instead of the regular forty-five minutes, was more than enough time to cover the syllabus. After all, half of the time was wasted on empty talk and quieting students. I had to admit that students did benefit. At least they saw less of such teachers.

The truth is that teachers themselves were deceived. The promised pay raise did not happen. Payments to the pension fund were not made, either.

My colleague Bojana retired and it was only upon her retirement that payments for her were made. Having worked in school for over thirty years, this prize-winning math teacher had a monthly salary of 168 Euros. It was after her retirement that she started giving private lessons. She worked as before, but at least now she had sufficient income to live.

I felt terrible when I voted against the strike. I was in a better financial position than most of my colleagues. Thanks to the family inheritance and my husband's private business, I could afford to work in the school. I observed younger colleagues in the staff room. Neither the young men nor the young women teachers got married. How were they to embark on an even harder struggle with such low salaries? I saw their eyes reproach me: "It's easy for you not to protest." They did not actually say this because they knew that I really loved my job. Naturally, I was not the only one: there were at least a couple of "hard-core teachers" in each school. For a while I still heard people say that Montenegro's school system was still holding up thanks to the enthusiasm of a small number of teachers. But instead of being places for teachers to have a little rest and prepare themselves for the next class, staff rooms became battlefields. As usual, this benefited the idlers.

The strike became a ruthless political game—it was used by almost all of Montenegro's parties in their struggle, but none of them was actually interested in the plight of the teachers. There was no chance that the teachers were going to get higher salaries, given the impoverishment of Montenegrin society. We could have remained on strike for years and still would have achieved nothing. At the same time, teachers were required to take part in the reform process and to believe in their social power and the state government that did not pay them enough to survive. Today, their pay is the same, but they are no longer on strike. Teachers have lost their illusion that strikes can bring about any changes, apart from individuals serving their own personal interests. It was in such an atmosphere that new school laws were adopted. Due to the politicization of the strike, their adoption was nearly seven months late. It is in the same atmosphere that reform preparation is reaching its final stage. Of course, many questions remain unanswered.

*Reduce the curriculum, but in such a way
that you are not ashamed of it²*

In Selimović's novel one of the characters says: "Life is broader than any regulation." And I know literature is also broader than any syllabus we could create. The more regulations, the less space for life. How were we to create a syllabus without "killing" literature? I did not want all those brilliant students, who were the reason for my great love of teaching, to be the worse for it. I no longer had that feeling of peace I had previously taught with, but in return I was given a freedom that I had not known before.

I was one of the two hundred teachers engaged by the National Curriculum Revision Council to work within subject committees. Training sessions and working to the deadline simply shattered the nerves of all of us who participated. At an astonishing speed, we were thrown into a different system of thinking and a different approach to teaching. We were forced to reexamine and change. It was marvellous that our students received a broad education. But it would not be the end of the world if they did not read every single masterpiece—*The Brothers Karamazov* or Kafka's *The Trial*, for example, or if they did not know every single species of smaller organism and all the minute details about the earthworm. It would not be the end of the world if students did not know the number of sheep per capita in Laos. They can find that out on the computer. What was the point of being well acquainted with the history of computers, and not actually knowing how to use them.

I realized that the attitude toward the syllabus, toward the books on the reading list, needed to be revised. The syllabus must serve the students, and not the other way around. Books should be respected, but not excessively respected. It really was not the end of the world if we had not read everything. This could even be to our benefit.

In one of my classes, there was a pupil who was exceptionally gifted in painting. Gentle, blond, and tall, he could come across as lost at times in the noisy class. He was not eloquent, and if I compared him with the others, I would not be able to give him the top mark. However, I was "disarmed" by a drawing in which he tried to express Baudelaire's ideas

² The subtitle is inspired by a sentence from Meša Selimović's novel *Death and the Dervish*: "Make your life as nice as you can, but in such a way that you are not ashamed of it."

about the senses and cognition. I realized that the process of drawing reached him in a profound and serious way. But if I went too far with my demands, I would stifle his need to respond with a drawing. I discreetly passed over the assigned reading material. “Mrs. Jelušić, which books are those that I mustn’t fail to read?” he quietly asked me from the first row. He kept his word, reading what I had asked him to, and I did not hesitate to give him the top mark.

Prior to going away to study art, the student came to say goodbye. “Now I can give you this painting,” he said, revealing a large, framed oil on canvas. “It was created while we were talking about the origins of the language and the difficulties of naming things. I think it belongs to you.” There was cosmic sorrow in the eye of the bird in the picture, while its beak let out a screech of agony. He mentioned his grandfather who was distraught at seeing him painting such weird creatures, diminishing the value of the present. But for me, this gift was greater than the national award I had won for teaching. I wondered what I would have lost had the reform not begun, together with my reassessment of my own teaching method. Who knows how many students I failed to get to know in pursuit of the required number of pages? In a moment this student had demolished everything and rebuilt everything. I beamed. In the bird’s eye there lay my defense. This was the way to “buy” an old teacher, I remembered with a smile.

I was comparing our solutions with those from other countries. Teachers needed to overcome their infatuation with their own subjects, with their marvellous and extensive curriculum, and curtail the syllabus in the name of responsibility for achieving the common goal. Now I was able to deal with that with ease. The most tiring part of the work took place in the summer of 2003. The temperature in Podgorica was over 40 degrees Celsius. In some countries there were ongoing debates on whether a temperature above 30 degrees should be declared a natural disaster for the duration of which work should be suspended. The curriculum had to be completed before September.

My colleagues from what had previously been the supervision department had pretty much the same feelings. They had to undergo a thorough training course and participate in reform-related tasks. So it happened that people who had for years controlled teachers working in the traditional way arrived in schools as reformists. We were waking up. The fact that I was satisfied with my own classes was not an alibi for me to shut my eyes to everything else. None of us who had engaged in reform

could go back to sleep. Our balanced world and comfortable belief in the system's perfection had disappeared for good.

As a member of the team working on the new literature curricula, I became fully convinced that the school reform was a highly democratic and open process. Just like history, literature is a subject that has a special place in multinational communities. Accordingly, toward the end of the work, representatives of Montenegro's Albanian and Bosnian ethnic minorities attempted to include in Montenegro's school syllabuses as many of their own writers as possible. I dreaded the possibility of burdening our students with relapsing into "representing" different nationalities through literature, instead of studying a work of art as an aesthetic category. Being a teacher of world literature and literary theory, I applied a value-based criterion as the starting point. One of the reasons was that Montenegro, with a total of about six hundred thousand inhabitants, could not produce such a large number of classic works. A small country must not be too inward looking—its homeland in the cultural sense of the word should be the entire world. But in multinational communities, when it comes to the literature syllabus, people do not take anyone at their word. A distinguished representative of one of the minorities warned me that proving an aesthetic criterion was always sophistic—one could defend anything with it. In a refined manner, he also threatened me with attacks in the press. On the whole, however, the syllabus was emerging as a result of agreements and compromises. Still, most of Montenegro's teachers did not bother to take part in the creation of the syllabus. We were still waking up hard.

*"Every man ends up at a loss"*³

I learned as a participant in the education reform in Montenegro that the reform was in the hands of the few people willing to take the initiative. Their advantage was that they were ready to admit their mistakes. They were ready to admit that they did not know all the correct answers. They searched for ways to overcome their ignorance. I do not delude myself that there are many of these, but I know that they are not a few, either.

Nuruddin, the hero from Selimović's novel, was reluctant to take action to save his own brother, as this entailed sacrificing the tranquility of

³ This sentence is part of a text that Meša Selimović used as a motto for his novel *Death and the Dervish*. It is originally taken from the *Kur'ran*.

his own beliefs and comfort of his own position. He was too late. In Montenegro the decision to relieve the students of the burden of an overambitious syllabus was finally made. Still, many people continued to doubt. It is always easier to adhere to the “heavenly measures.” In such a way we escape failure, or find reasons for it that lie somewhere outside of ourselves. It is also pleasant to take pride in the illusion of how brilliantly “our people” are doing “in the world”—it defends us from remorse.

The vision of the reform has now been shaped. It focuses on the students, who are now supposed to emerge from school equipped with enhanced knowledge and a more humane and democratic frame of mind. All people in Montenegro were offered and even required to participate in the school reform. Social power connected with education was truly at the citizens’ fingertips. And in accordance with what they had been taught for fifty years—the vast majority refused to participate. This is why Montenegrin reform is in fact the story of a hard waking up, of a ghastly hangover, and an effort to create a new belief and new sense. It is also a story of my own hard waking up. Or of my trial.

Will the shortcomings of our educational system disappear with the reform? From now on I should feel obliged to have doubts about the new curriculum. This will require being consistent with what I have finally realized.

We are bound to lose certain things.

I have had excellent students. Many of them dealt with literature in diverse ways, but efficiently. Such students might be the worse for it.

I will lose my “ramble” through the literary works that I loved so much. The path will be much shorter, but then I will not have to run.

I am certain that the majority will gain from it.

Selimović’s novel opens with the words saying that, in the end, every man ends up at a loss.

Each curriculum always ends up at a loss, too.

But that is the only way to gain in something.

The story of reform is my Socrates and my Mephistopheles.

Postscript

On the first of May 2004, I go out to do my morning shopping. It is early; the town has just started to “wake.” While inhaling the salty smell of the sea, I recall the May holidays and red flags from the old days. On a wall, I see a fresh graffito: “Comrade Tito—we’re on drugs.” A handful of sil-

ver letters bordered by a black line is more expressive than any analysis. How come they remembered Tito, I wonder. For the past few years I have had difficulty explaining to them who Tito was and what socialism meant. For quite some time now in Montenegro's spellers the letter *M* has been illustrated by "mummy," whereas the letter *T* is for "tata" or daddy.

Recently, a student asked me to name the epoch in which man was the happiest. In none of them and in each of them, I replied, thinking not only of epochs but of the fate of every human endeavor, of the time of my youth and their youth, even of the reform we had just conceived.

I am sure that they, too, will regard themselves as a relatively lucky generation one day, for reasons that I cannot even imagine.

Everybody's School

By Bardhyl Musai, Albania

Commissar of the Red Light

I remember September 1978. I had just graduated from university. Bursting with enthusiasm, I marched off to work as a teacher, a “Commissar of the Red Light” in the parlance of the Communist Party.

I was assigned to a school in a remote village in Belsh, a farming area in central Albania. I had heard about Belsh during my childhood, about its picturesque lake, about the special beauty of its rolling hills. Idealized images flickered in my mind and I thought Belsh might have made a fitting place in which to establish Albania's capital city.

The Belsh I found, however, was something less than a dream. My tiny school—back then, the Communist Party called schools “hearths for the education of the new socialist man”—was a place where the light of day could barely find its way into the classrooms. The blackboards were worn through and not at all black. The chalk was unsuitable for the written word. Most of the windowpanes had been broken and replaced with cardboard and plastic sheeting. The walls had not been painted for years and resembled worn maps of ocean floors and unknown continents. Each of the villages in Belsh had a school in similar disrepair. Most of the teachers who worked in them lived miles away, in the town of Elbasan, and had to commute every day for several hours. My home town was much farther away, about fifty kilometers, and the lack of a proper road made it impossible for me to commute on a daily basis. So I would travel to my village in Belsh every Monday and return home on Saturdays.

In those days, we teachers, the Commissars of the Red Light, spent most of our time doing the work of agitprop, agitation and propaganda on behalf of the Party. Our job was to deliver the message of Communism in

one direction, top down: The people at the top spoke, we passed on their pronouncements, and the people at the bottom, the masses, listened and obeyed, because they had to listen and obey. We spread out over the countryside, reading the Party's newspapers aloud to groups of farmers. We told tales about Albania's advancement under the leadership of our great leader, Enver Hoxha. We hailed each victory in the country's struggle against "imperialism" and "modern revisionism" and other shadow opponents. And, of course, we marched our pupils up the sides of hills and mountains to gather rocks by the thousands and arrange them in block letters that spelled out slogans visible for miles: "Collectivization Means Prosperity!" "Collectivization Liberates Women!" There was so much agitprop work to be done that we had little time for teaching. There was no need to waste time, though, on free communication or exchanges of ideas, because everything, from our school building to the wisdom we spouted, sprang from the collective mind of Enver Hoxha and the Party leadership like a clear stream that burst forth from a rock and flowed down a mountain into the lake at Belsh.

After the 1970s, the Party had become so confident of its wisdom that it shut out all foreign literature. Albania had no more need of books and articles from outside the country. Psychology, sociology, didactics, philosophy, everything of value Albania was producing on its own. The borders were shut to fiction, too, for it would poison the minds of our working masses. And the few science books that managed to find their way over the frontiers never reached us in Belsh. We were forbidden to listen to foreign radio stations, even when they were broadcasting music. We were forbidden to learn Western languages on our own. Albania's state security service, the Sigurimi, was ever vigilant. Getting caught disobeying these bans might mean internment in a work camp or imprisonment for "reeducation." I lived alone. My only relief from loneliness was a radio I kept in my room and cherished like a friend. I did not dare to listen to any foreign radio stations. But late at night, I would tune to Radio Tirana's broadcast in English, because it was the only way I could hear the forbidden tongue.

It was 1981 when the Commissars of the Red Light had to march in the vanguard of the Party's campaign to collectivize Albania's farm animals. Belsh's United Cooperative, its agricultural co-op, was considered one of the district's most advanced. But the state essentially confiscated whatever the local farmers produced, and little in terms of reward ever returned to ease their hardship or relieve the dreariness of daily life. Col-

lectivization was the taking of their last private property, adding to their alienation in more ways than one. I recall even now the faces of the farmers as their empty chicken coops were destroyed. I can still sense the pain they were suffering as the last grazing animals they had—two or three sheep, in most instances—were led away from their pens. Injury came with insult. These farmers not only had to conceal their grief; they had to act as if they were happy. They had to thank the Party, to express the heartfelt conviction that their sacrifice was for their own good, the good of something called the “socialist village,” and the good of all Albania. Our duty as Commissars of the Red Light was to suppress our pangs of guilt, to delude everyone, including ourselves, and to hail collectivization as the best way to strengthen something called the “cooperativist economy.” None of us knew where the money generated from the factories and plants went. Poverty, it seemed, would be our fate for all eternity.

I remember how, as our school was collapsing and nobody was bothering to repair it, the leaders were building one domed concrete bunker after another, issuing fresh military uniforms to cover the torn undershirts of Albania's men, and putting us on constant alert against imaginary enemies readying to attack at any second. Shabbily dressed children—in winter, wet and shivering—confronted the Commissars of the Red Light. The bad breath smell of empty young stomachs infected the air that we, the Commissars, had to breathe in our classrooms. Faces still full of aspirations and dreams looked up at us from broken down school benches. And all the while, we were deceiving them, and we knew it, and, perhaps for this reason, we were not convincing.

Slowly and somehow silently, the reality of Albania—the poverty, the police, the blackboards no longer black—eroded every trace of trust in the Communist Party and its Commissars of the Red Light. The reality sneered at everything we had been taught and it glowered at the wisdom we were passing down from the great leader.

In those days, I was lucky to have friends who dared to trust me not to reveal their secret opinions and whom I could trust not to reveal mine. At the end of one weekend, as my friend Ibrahim and I were making our regular commute back to Belsh, I learned about the fall of the Berlin Wall. It seemed to us a dream. When we arrived at the school in our village, we noticed that the other teachers and the doctors and farm managers who worked nearby were all whispering to one another.

“Did you hear?”

“Yes, yes. Only. . .”

People were happily whispering these words into each other's ears. They wanted to hear stories of the fallen wall, over and over, and over again. They wanted to believe that it could be true, that it could be possible. I recall it being the first time that no one cared whether the Sigurimi's informers were listening, because it was clear that the informers themselves were dumbfounded and curious. The Communist bastion was crumbling.

"What now?"

We burned with uncertainty. We wondered how we would survive. What about the schools? What will happen to our schools? What will happen to our wages? Will we still be paid? Can we manage even to feed our families the beans and pasta we had been putting on the table? What will become of our pupils?

This last question resounded like a hammer blow.

We knew everything would be different, sooner or later. But it was still impossible to predict when and how. Most people still looked with suspicion upon almost everybody and everything. Thousands of Albanians fled over the mountains to Greece to labor for slave wages. Others slapped together rafts and commandeered boats and set off across the Adriatic for Italy, and when they were apprehended and returned to Albania, they slapped together more rafts and commandeered more boats and set sail again. The Party remained in control of the country. The most loyal of the dictatorship's lackeys were stunned and desperate to save their positions. I will never forget an open meeting some Communist diehards organized in our town's theater. They invited many teachers and other intellectuals, and I went. It was a wake. Pallid faces gazed at one another, wondering, uttering not a word, but asking: How can we escape this fate?

A little more time and courage were needed to take the first tangible steps away from everything we had known.

In February 1991, students from the Enver Hoxha University in Tirana went on a hunger strike. They demanded that the name of the dictator be struck from the university. After the authorities rejected the students' demand, crowds of angry people occupied the capital's main square. A few hours later, they toppled an imposing statue of the dictator and dragged it like a sacrificial offering to the building on the university campus where the students were still on strike. Communist rule collapsed with that statue.

Teacher

I recall 1990, the year the definitions changed. We were no longer Commissars of the Red Light. Our hearth for the education of the socialist man had gone cold. Now, as the great transition got underway, our aim, there in our tiny village in Belsh, was to make a real school. We understood that building democracy had to start by reconstructing more than the dilapidated school buildings. The desks, the curricula, the textbooks were beyond use. But there was a deeper problem. The habits imprinted on our minds during years of indoctrination were beyond use. Confusion marked the beginning of the transition. We needed help and it could only come from outside.

It took five years for the real work to begin. The people from George Soros's foundation first visited Belsh in February 1995. It was not easy for the teachers, much less the villagers, to think and speak about cooperation with foreigners. For half a century, the Party had kept Albania isolated and drilled the ideology of autarky into the minds of our people. Our reflex action, our habit of mind, was to do everything on our own, with no help from the outside world. We had been told—and I, we, the Commissars of the Red Light, had taught—that foreigners sought only to sabotage and destroy our brilliant achievements. Every foreigner was a potential enemy, an infiltrator, a spy from some foreign intelligence service that wanted to snatch victory from our grasp. We had been taught never to be submissive, never to ask for help; we were to demonstrate our superiority. So even after the crowd had pulled down the statue of Enver Hoxha and dragged it to the university campus, anything coming from abroad met with suspicion. And suspicion ruined the first visit by the Soros foundation's representatives after preposterous rumors spread that George Soros was using his aid effort to penetrate Albania in order to launder money and undermine the country's development. We felt ridiculous. We were dealing with an entirely unfamiliar situation. But somehow—I cannot even now recall how—the reconstruction began. And imagine where it had to begin, for even the wastebaskets in the classrooms and the trash bins in the schoolyard needed to be replaced; they had been small under the Communists, because there had never been much of anything to throw away. Now we had to deal with overflowing trash.

In some areas of the country, the World Bank and European Union built new schools. In other areas, including Belsh, the Soros foundation

built them. There was a difference between the Soros schools and the others then, a fundamental difference that went beyond the colors and sizes of the classrooms. According to Soros's philosophy, it is not enough simply to provide the financial and other means to put up walls and chalkboards worthy of the written word. It is more important to work with the people—the pupils, the principals, and the teachers—to help them focus on the tasks at hand, to help them understand that they own the decision-making process, that the school belongs to them as residents, as taxpayers. And because it is theirs, they must participate in solving the school's problems, they must assume responsibility. Soros's representatives made a practice of fostering interaction between parents and pupils and teachers and the broader village community. These representatives demanded that the community provide ideas about the schools. How did the people want the schools to look, from the classrooms to the gym to the schoolyard to the garden?

Other institutions in the business of building schools did not take this approach and the result was the replacement of worn-out buildings with new ones that did not buzz with the activity that resonated from our village school in Belsh. The entire village, at home, at work during break time, in the few coffee shops, was speaking about the school. When people greeted one another and finished the customary exchange of news about their families, their troubles, and their worries, the topic of conversation turned almost exclusively to the school. A man named Met, the father of one pupil, informed Soros's representatives that he and other parents wanted to volunteer to build a new school garden. Çelik, a parent from Seferan, said that he and other villagers would volunteer to work every afternoon to build a new school gymnasium. Nazmi from Trojas and other villagers opposed building a plain, stereotypical façade; they wanted it to be meaningful and lively. The children themselves helped to paint and clean and carry materials. All the work was to be coordinated by the parents' committee and its chairman, Petrit. With participation, the veil of suspicion disappeared. And, in time, when the cars of the Soros representatives pulled up, parents went out into the street and—as required by the local rules of hospitality—greeted them and took them in for coffee and exchanged the obligatory news about their families, their troubles, and their worries. Then they went to work together.

The result, however, did not become the pride of the village until the teachers and the rest of the community took an active role in the development of education policies. Wisdom no longer sprang from a single

great mind and flowed down into Belsh like a mountain stream into the lake. We, the former Commissars of the Red Light, attended training sessions, discussed what went on in our schools, debated how to improve ourselves and our techniques and devised our own projects for improving teaching methods and evaluating pupil progress. Communication between teachers, parents, and pupils became more frequent. Tiny Belsh, of all places, founded Albania's first Parents' Association. Tiny Belsh was first to adopt modern teaching techniques.

Gunshots and Flames

I will never forget the early spring of 1997. Pyramid investment schemes were something unknown in Albania until after the crowd dragged the statue of Enver Hoxha to the university. The Communist Party never taught us how to invest personal savings. People had no experience with banks or loans or credits. And when the pyramids collapsed that spring, the gullible and the greedy and the naive—most of them émigrés with hard currency earned slaving away in Italy and Greece—lost all their savings. The anger soon turned into an armed uprising. Albanians attacked not only the firms that ran the pyramid schemes, but also the government members and bodies that supported or condoned them.

Crowds plundered military barracks and arms depots. Mobs looted stores and offices and homes and libraries and schools. They smashed windows. They burned government buildings built during the dictatorship, as if they were responsible for half a century of misery. People killed to settle accounts, to revel in a sense of omnipotence, to feel unafraid in their environment.

The crack of gunshots and smell of gunpowder and blood spread even to tiny Belsh. I will never forget the moment when the face of Nevruz, a quiet, amiable man, one of the most active and hardworking persons in the community, appeared on a television screen. Robbers had tried to steal the only cow he had left. And they killed him when he tried to stop them. The killers were known. They lived in the same village. They were roaming the streets with impunity. The law and the state could not punish them. The law and the state had ceased to exist. People could hardly venture out in the streets without risking their lives.

One afternoon, a gang of armed men appeared on the streets. Eyes peering through windows saw them and knew what they wanted.

“Instinctively, we went outside,” said Agron, one of the teachers. “We ran toward the school. And the gang saw us and left. We thought that would be it, but that night, after I had just fallen asleep, I heard my son screaming. ‘Daddy, daddy, I think the school is being looted!’ I got up and so did many others. We went to the school to see and we were so relieved to find that nothing had happened. Our children could not sleep. They were also watching out for the school, just as we were. But events kept rolling.” Shops, pubs, and other buildings were destroyed.

On March 13, 1997, the skies over Albania were cloudy, and by evening it had started to rain. In our village in Belsh, an excited mob, armed with stolen guns and trailed by excited boys and dogs, set off to loot the school building.

When they arrived at the gates, the school security guard shouted from inside to back away. The mob ignored him.

“Not here!” the watchman shouted. “Never!”

Shouts from the crowd boomed and threatened him. Hands and arms and boots tried to bust down the front gate.

The watchman fired a gunshot into the ground at their feet. “You can loot my house, but never the school. It is neither mine, nor yours. It is everybody’s school.” More gunfire rang out in front of the school, shooting erupted all over the village, and the mob fled in every direction and disappeared. When the watchman went out into the rain, he found nothing except a dead dog covered in blood beside the school gate.

The next day the mayor summoned the town council to an emergency meeting. They decided that two men would guard the school each night together with the watchman. Shefqet, chairman of the Parents’ Association, assigned the men who would stand guard. Nobody shied away. And some of the women were so annoyed that they complained that Shefqet had not included them. “The school,” they said, “does not belong to the men alone.”

Night after night, the vigil went on. Night after night, the guards waited with guns for the looters to return.

Afterword

At times I think back on 1997, and on how time has passed so quickly since then. It is painful to recall how Albania had to pay for those weeks of rage and gunfire and flames in the night. Disillusionment and misery grew worse for a time. Thousands of Albanians sank into despair. Law-

lessness took root in places where it still flourishes. And waves of desperate, motivated people fled our country.

As the days and years slipped by, reason, too, returned. We, in Belsh, still had our lake, and it still reflected the textures and colors of our rolling hills. Neighbors still greeted one another on the streets. And in accordance with age-old custom, they still exchanged the obligatory questions and listened to the obligatory answers about family and troubles. And when they had finished, they turned their conversation back to our school, for it had survived because they had saved it. Laughing children once more answered the school bell, filled the big trash container with their work scraps, and played in the gymnasium that the hands of the community had built. And together, parents and teachers and pupils and villagers had returned to their meetings and debates, raising questions, proposing solutions, drawing lessons, redrawing plans, arguing, adjusting, building, fixing. . .

In towns and villages where the new schools had only been new buildings, no one had stood in the looters' way. All they left behind were empty shells.

From Čoček to Brahms and Back

By Refika Mustafić, Serbia

The Roma Education Center in the Serbian city of Niš began its life seven years ago in an attic apartment of a private house on the fringe of the Romani ghetto. We jammed into two small rooms and a narrow kitchen. Our landlord, Grandpa Jule, would under no circumstances remove the freezer; so we had to make sure no one made off with any of his frozen chickens. Jule also left us a big dining table and a sofa, and they occupied almost all the floor space, so getting from our office to our classroom required slalom maneuvers. A wallpaper photo of a piece of heaven with palm trees and an ocean covered one wall of the classroom. A lightbulb hung from the ceiling. A local church gave us a dozen or so half-broken chairs and desks with shiny tops, which we arranged in a circle around the teacher's desk, a scratched tinplated restaurant table covered with a tablecloth. The classroom was so cramped that a general commotion arose every time someone had to go to the toilet. In 1999, I managed to sneak our first blackboard out of my elementary school as a "private loan." I had to swear not to tell anyone where I had gotten it, because during those days of Milošević's Serbia, assisting a nongovernmental organization in its work was considered a subversive act. This enormous, warped blackboard, punctured in three places by shoes, compasses, and other projectiles, was transported to our center in a horse cart. The children tried constantly to wipe away its scars; and when the children were not around, we secretly tried to do the same.

My story of the Roma Education Center, however, began long before my knees ever banged any of the furniture in Grandpa Jule's crowded attic. My story of the education center began with my parents.

My mother was a midwife and my father a violinist and music teacher. By day, my father used to play Brahms in a symphony orchestra; and by night, in the restaurants of Niš, his instrument would skirl the seductive

melodies and rhythms of the *čoček*, the uninhibited folk dance of the Roma. During the intermissions, he liked to surprise the other musicians and anyone else who might be listening by switching from *čoček* to Brahms to *čoček* and back again, just to prove that the two were not mutually exclusive. He and my mother were unusual for their generation of Roma. They were educated and more able to explain things clearly and in detail than other Roma. For this reason, they had problems proving they were Roma enough for our Romani neighbors. In an attempt to be just as Roma as the other Roma, they did not speak to my older brother in the Serbian language. When he first went to school, my brother was astonished to learn that he didn't know how to ask permission to go to the toilet. In order to correct this error, my parents didn't speak to me in the Romany language.

I have no happy memories of elementary school. It certainly wasn't a place I would have chosen for myself. In my grade there were four other Romani children, and we were relegated to different classes. Mine, by some strange circumstance, was filled with the children of doctors, surgeons, psychiatrists, judges, and teachers. The teacher sat me in the last row, next to an Albanian girl whose name was Rusmira. My Romani friends, and Rusmira, too, were ill prepared to start school. They were not proficient in the Serbian language, and a cultural chasm separated us from the Serbs. After I received my first set of excellent marks, my teacher placed me in the front row. Rusmira stayed where she was, there in the back. In order to show that I was not ashamed of her and my Romani friends, I was determined to stay in the last row, too. Though there were differences between Rusmira and me—she was an Albanian, I a Roma—everyone else considered us to be something apart and cast us into the same basket. Rusmira somehow seemed to feel best when she was left alone in her own world, and she did not even let me near. The more she closed herself off, however, the more I identified with her. The environment was competitive, and I always had to invest more effort than the rest of the pupils to find my spot under the teacher's sun. Rusmira remained in the shade. And, for this reason, I too felt very cold.

This sense of being different and somehow ashamed tainted my elementary school days. I recall a story by a Slovene writer named Cankar. It was called "Ten Pence," and it was about a gypsy boy who felt ashamed of his mother and his family and the poverty they all suffered. My mother spoke of this same theme, though differently: "Don't let this by any chance happen to you."

I certainly would not. Who would?

Lacking words, the Romani kids were prepared to fight, and fight we did. Each time, of course, the disciplinarian would intervene; and the message we always got was that we were always guilty. Most Romani parents were not motivated to stand up for us, because schooling does not rank high on their list of priorities. The other children and our teachers found nothing of interest or importance in the values and lore we brought from our Romani and Albanian traditions.

So, with time, the Romani child learns that the others don't want to sit in the next chair. The Romani child learns that Romani children somehow always end up in the last row in class, or at a special desk, or in a special class or a special school. (In Surdulica, a small town in southern Serbia inhabited by large numbers of Roma, 80 percent of the children in schools for the mentally retarded were Roma.) Liberated by summer vacation after their first or second or third year of school, many Romani children I knew simply did not answer another class bell. Only a tiny portion of the girls finished the fifth grade, and almost all of them went no further. Most boys stopped at the end of primary school. By then, the resistance has worn them down. The Romani child and his or her Romani parents decide to bolster their identity by retreating into seclusion, into their natural milieu, into the poverty-stricken part of town inhabited by the Roma alone, into the ghetto.

I have a recurring memory of an incident I once witnessed in the ghetto. I recall seeing two Romani boys, brothers probably, who were fighting over a crust of bread. Both were barefoot, the younger one naked. The older one grabbed the bread from the younger. And the younger boy cried at first, then tried calling for help. When nothing happened, he started to chase the older one, but the crust of bread somehow stayed just out of reach. Then the younger boy grabbed his penis and pissed on the older one. The shock of this attack froze the older boy just long enough for the younger one to grab the crust of bread and find a way to outrun him. In the ghetto, you learn quickly there is no point wasting time looking for help. In the ghetto, it is a struggle for survival each moment. And awareness of this forges a system of values. The only thing that matters is the here and now; in another second, the crust of bread will be gone. I recall that both of these boys were placed in the same school for the mentally handicapped. Their parents argued with me that the best solution for them was to remain where they were. After finishing school, they said, the state would find the boys jobs.

A black hole consumed them. The same black hole that swallowed Rusmira and many of my Romani friends. Somehow, even today, I am still afraid it will swallow me.

I love literature. And in the year 1994 I crowned my love with a university diploma from the Faculty of Serbo-Croatian Language and Yugoslav Literature and began work as a teacher. I wanted to pass on my knowledge to other Rusmiras and provide them all the understanding and love that we did not receive in school.

Even as a teacher, however, I had to prove myself worthy simply because I was a Roma. The school authorities transferred me from one school to another. I would not have taken this very hard if, after a year of teaching, a parents' council had not denied my application for a permanent teaching position because I was, in the members' eyes, just a gypsy. A pupil in my homeroom informed me of the council's decision. One of his parents was a council member. The school's principal assured me that he appreciated my work and methods and that he wanted to keep me in the education system. He recommended me to the principal of another school that had a larger number of Romani children. There, I encountered the reverse side of the acceptance problem. The Romani children asked how it was possible for a gypsy to teach the Serbo-Croatian language.

This opened my eyes to how low the expectation levels were for the Roma and their children and to how rigid and stale were the stereotypes imprisoning us. We were taught to assume that rubbish dumps and garbage heaps were the only place of business for the Roma, that the ghetto was the realm of the Roma, that the Roma were idlers and delinquents, that the Roma knew only how to sing and dance the *čoček*, that the Roma were somehow mystical and high-spirited and did not fit into Europe's value system. Even our little school did not want to accept me. I realized why there were few, if any, Roma filling the responsible professional, economic, and political positions in our community, why the Roma got the most degrading and lowest-paying jobs, and why Roma at the university are as rare as black pearls. There was no atmosphere of support for the children who must struggle with an unknown language, there was no effort to invite the parents to participate in school affairs. Once, at a meeting of my school's teachers' council, the Romani parents were criticized for failing to attend parent-teacher meetings. When I offered to visit

these irresponsible parents and ask them to come, the principal voiced his disapproval and said that if I made these visits behind the school's back, I would be doing so in my name only. I was baffled. Did the principal and other teachers really want to change anything? They complained about the Romani parents, but did not want to undertake anything to remove the grounds for complaint. I was disgusted.

And so the Roma Education Center began its work, in the attic apartment, above Grandpa Jule's home, on the fringe of the ghetto, in Niš. Our loftiest objectives were to emancipate the Roma, to fight stereotyping, to promote human rights, to research social relations and other issues related to the Roma, to improve communication among the Roma in order to strengthen their sense of identity. Our immediate goal, however, was modest and innocuous enough: to work with seventh and eighth graders and help prepare them to succeed in secondary school by creating a place with an atmosphere of support, a place where they felt as if they were someone's favorite. We established extra-help classes in Serbian, mathematics, history, physics, chemistry, English, computer science, and the other subjects taught at school. Each time one of the children said, "I can't" or "I am stupid" or "I don't know," we replied, "You can" and "You know" and "Bravo" and "This may not have interested you until now, but here is the way to do it."

Kemal, Raki, Naser, Romana, and Žada were our beginning. They attended school only occasionally and none of them, it seemed, had ever done their homework. One day, their geography teacher promised to award an A to any pupil who wrote a paper on a nearby mountain. The deadline was just two days away. We registered a number of Romani pupils at the public library and checked out a few encyclopedias; and, while the children read the entries aloud to us, we typed random facts about the mountain into the Education Center's computer. From these facts, we helped the children compose original, individual reports. It was a big success for us when the pupils typed their own names on the first page. This was their first experience of a library, the first time anyone had shown them how to find needed information and how to work on a computer. For some of them it was an opportunity to practice reading, because they read only with great difficulty. We fastened the pages together, and the children took the finished reports to school. The teacher was certain, I'm

sure, that they had somehow cheated. But at school no one could figure out where the Romani children in only two days had gotten individual reports written on a computer. All of them raised their grades from F to D. Then they came back asking for help writing papers in biology.

These five children spread the story about the Roma Education Center, and soon large numbers of children started crowding into the attic apartment. At first, many of them came just to warm themselves, to drink tea, to take advantage of our unusual behavior. Then they loosened up and started to feel that the center was their own. They started approaching us with real requests: "I don't know how to solve equations with two unknowns, how do you do that?" "Why is *svadba* not spelt *svatba* in Serbian?" "Why was the battle on the Čegar important?"

A boy named Gumeni was one of the new children. Gumeni was chubby with big, black, curious eyes, always well dressed, and a real hypochondriac. While the rest of the children studied in the classroom, Gumeni detailed for us each of his allergies. He helped Grandpa Jule and went on errands for him and grabbed every opportunity to play games on the center's computer, which seemed like the eighth wonder of the world to the children of the Romani part of town. Also, for hours at a time, Gumeni would pore over the medical books; it took us a long time to figure out that he was carefully selecting ones with pictures.

How Gumeni had gotten to the seventh grade was a mystery, for he did not know how to read. As we were teaching him the letters and words, he sat sandwiched between my colleague and me, sweating profusely. He kept asking for water to drink. He would ask incessantly to go to the toilet. Then he would start drinking water again, and give various excuses and imagine obligations all in an effort to leave. Everyone from the center regularly gave him a verse or two from a poem and made him read them before he was allowed to play Tetris.

Today, the wall at the entrance to the Roma Education Center has a display of photos with Gumeni as the central character. He was our mascot, and his growth tracked our development. In the first photo, the chemistry teacher is hugging Gumeni. He was tall enough then to reach her shoulder; and behind them you can see our big, warped, punctured blackboard and the wallpaper of heaven. In the next photo, Gumeni is standing alone, holding a book; by then we had probably discovered that he was illiterate. He is smiling slyly, negotiating with us whether he has read enough for the day. In the next picture, we have caught him stealing candies; his face is the face of a child reveling in mischief; he is laughing,

and while we were taking the picture, his mouth was so full he could not utter a word; when he swallowed the candies he said he wanted to get married, then he ran off as fast as he could.

In the next picture, Gumeni is dancing with the English teacher. He is now tall enough to reach her forehead. He is looking at the camera, he has already taken total charge of the center, and the teacher has the expression of a mother who is for the first time dancing in public with her youngest son. In another picture, Gumeni is wearing a white sweat suit; he has lost some weight; his face has taken on the image of a grown-up, but his is still the smile of a child. In the background are children. Word has already spread about us.

Gumeni is with the English teacher again in the next photo. By now he has grown taller than her by a head. They are talking about something. The center has come down from the attic to a new location. In the background is a huge space out of which we will make three classrooms.

In the last of the pictures, Gumeni is alone in a formal suit before going out to a formal dinner with his school friends. He is very handsome; his eyelashes cast a shadow on his cheeks; his hair is greased, like a character from *The Godfather*; he has a stern, “dangerous” look. In the background is a green van we use to drive children from different parts of the city to school.

We have already seen five groups of children come and go. Gumeni is now in secondary school. He comes to the center less often than before. But each time, he brings us good CDs, which he burns himself.

For several years, the Roma Education Center was almost an underground movement: a nongovernmental organization, an institution operating outside the framework of Milošević’s Serbian state. Stories spread through town about Romani children coming to us and returning to their classes with neatly written homework, about Romani children correctly answering questions about the significance of the battle on the Čegar, about Romani children knowing how to solve equations with two variables, about Romani children who knew why it was *svadba* and not *svatba*, and about Romani parents starting to attend parent–teacher meetings.

Angry school officials launched investigations. My principal fired me from my teaching job. We were accused of making a mockery of the

school and the education system. People asked how Romani pupils who usually failed could start getting A's without cheating. The principal who fired me—a man who boasted about being a jail warden immediately before he was appointed to the school—barred any pupils from the first to the eighth grades from visiting the Roma Education Center. We were denounced as spies. Our initiative was declared dangerous. The principal spread stories about the conspiracies in which we were playing a role.

I attempted to state our case before the Ministry of Education:

“What are you handing out in this center?” they asked.

“Only knowledge.”

“Oh, so nothing?”

The ministry people considered it ridiculous and pointless that we were offering Brahms instead of *čoček*. They thought I was seeking revenge for getting fired.

Now, I know they did me a favor.

Milošević fell from power in the autumn of the year 2000. In the four years since then, the Roma Education Center has worked with children of all ages.

We devise tests for psychologists to use when evaluating whether Romani children are mature enough to start school. We cheat on the medical exams by sewing stones into the smaller children's pockets so they can make the minimum weight. We sometimes play children's shows and cartoons for them to watch. We hold classes in which Romani children can express themselves in the Romany language and run cultural adaptation programs to help the children speak and do their homework in Serbian. (The children converse and swear in both Romany and Serbian, and during breaks we allow them to dance *čoček* and we teach them about Brahms.)

When our children get excited, they thrust their hands into the air. They snap their fingers. They strike the pose you take when waiting for the *čoček* to begin, and they start to dance. We use the rhythm of the music and a computer with a microphone to explain the syllables of words and improve their reading.

The number of Romani children attending elementary school increased slightly in 2003–04. Thirty children were placed in the school for children with special needs, almost a quarter of the school's enrollment,

still a large comparative number, but far less than the 80 percent in Surdulica. We have only now started developing a database to monitor the success curve of the children who attend the Roma Education Center's programs. So far, schools have not given us access to the official evaluation data, because we are a nongovernmental organization. Evidence of success or failure depends on the willingness of homeroom teachers to share information; but since our country functions on the principle of good will, we often find a way of peeping into the system.

The local office of Serbia's Ministry of Education and Sports now allows us to sit at the table with school administrators, psychologists, and university professors to discuss strategies for improving Romani education. This recognition alone has been a success. The problem of Romani education has also risen to the republic level, and the Roma Education Center and other nongovernmental organizations have provided input for the proposed strategy for improving Romani education. This strategy defines the right problems: poor quality of instruction, discrimination and segregation, and the absence of conditions for cultivating and expressing ethnic identity. The strategy calls for attacking these problems by creating conditions within the education system for integrating the Roma, developing special enrollment policies, providing material support, and boosting motivation.

At the school level, changes are also underway. Romani assistant teachers have been introduced into schools to help bridge the gulf between the Serbian and Romani cultures, languages, and value systems. These assistants speak the same language as the Romani parents and can do officially almost everything the Roma Education Center is doing on an informal basis. Teachers have also begun to exchange lists of Romani pupils who display weaknesses in certain subjects.

The Roma Education Center holds workshops on Romani history, language, legends, music, values, and traditions for professors, teachers, and administrators. After the workshops, we hand out small anthologies of Romani myths and legends passed down from generation to generation. We also hand out strategies for working with bilingual children and tips on our experience using music and karaoke in teaching Romani children how to read. Not all of the teachers and administrators are open to learning about other cultures, and some are not prepared to talk about the Romani culture without seeing it as an attack on their own.

Today, we are organizing international seminars and developing exchange programs for students of Central and Eastern Europe. The Roma

Education Center also provides scholarship information and acts as an intermediary between students and donor organizations. We have organized seminars for pupils in their final year of secondary school and for students enrolled at institutions of higher education in Niš, Aleksinac, Belgrade, and Kragujevac. The most gripping part of these seminars has been a work group in which many of the student participants for the first time stated loudly, clearly, and freely who they were.

"I am beautiful, but I am black," lamented one, a dyed blonde. "I am a Gypsy!"

"You are not a Gypsy, but a Roma."

"No, I am a Gypsy! Oh, mother, why did you, a Gypsy, have to be the one to bring me into this world."

She started crying.

And so it went round the circle.

Serbs and other outsiders might call this melodrama. For us it was like the music to which you dance the hardest *čoček*, the *praho čoček*. The *čoček* Salome danced for Saint John the Baptist's head.

And heads do fall.

And the Serbs cried.

We have used this work group to seek young people with the potential to make a mark in the struggle for Romani education, in the struggle for free expression of their national identity. We try to interest them in the problems Roma face, so tomorrow they will take up the struggle to solve them. The members of my generation who succeeded in acquiring higher education did so by their own effort alone and only by assimilating into the identity of the majority. As a result, many educated members of my generation are no longer Roma. Sometimes I think it is important to be distanced from social poverty to obtain results. It is a question of personal skill, however, to recognize the moment when distance becomes alienation. A good friend of mine simply says, "All of us must leave in order to return." The question is how to secure the return.

We can strengthen our national capacities only through education, and only by improving competence can we cope with a public constantly expecting to hear *čoček* while we, in our own way, are playing the nine-eighths time of Brahms. I can still see how the newly educated Roma face the same old problem: Among the Roma, they are never Gypsy enough. Among the Serbs, they are always Gypsies and never good enough.

I tell these stories for them.

Halim a Thousand Times: “Make a School like a Home”

*By Lindita Tahiri, Kosova
with contributions from Dukagjin Pupovci*

Today is Monday, September the first. During the past weekend, I lined up the new books, pencils, and notebooks and new school clothes for my boys, and learned the names of their new teachers. *My* new school year is just beginning. My nightmare is the same old one: my little boys will complain of boring textbooks and the droning voices of the harsh teachers forcing them to learn their lessons by heart. Then the boys will skip homework and run to the nearest Internet club to play some horrid electronic game, something with an even more horrid name: “Counterstrike.” (I just read on the Internet that this kind of game is forbidden even in the United States.) Then, at home in the evenings, they will ask me how well I remember those same boring lessons—they haven’t changed since I was in school—and how much I’ve applied them in my own life. (I try to re-read these lessons as I scurry back and forth between the pot boiling on the stove and the dishes in the sink.)

During my lunch break, I rush to catch a glimpse of my boys in class. At the entrance to their school, the guard asks me long suspicious questions before he lets me in. I walk down the hallway and knock on one of the hospital-white doors. A teacher rises from behind the desk and smiles, and, as I walk in, the pupils stand up like an army platoon and salute me with a chorus-like “Good Morning.” The air around them is palpably dull.

I glance quickly at my younger boy. He used to cry so much when his older brother—only a year separates them—went to school first; the younger one forced his way into school, abruptly leaving his childhood behind. Next to him stands his brother, solemn and tidy, and he winks at me. I know he is cheating, only pretending to join the class in shouting responses to the teacher. “This new generation is hard to deal with,” the teacher says. “They lack discipline and good manners.” Then he forces a

grin. "Organizations like yours sometimes make this worse by stressing only the rights of the child. Some of them only understand the stick, you know, unlike children from well-educated families like yours." I mumble some sort of good-bye and rush out and down the corridor, feeling a big lump in my chest. (How many more blows for them, damn you, they are my babies.) Then there is a burst of wild laughter: "You parents could not walk around up and down the stairs like this in the old times when I was almost the principal." It is the school guard. He gloomily closes the doors behind me.

With average school space of approximately 1.1 square meters per pupil, most of Kosova's 550 primary and 80 secondary schools work in two to four shifts in order to meet the needs of the local young people. Due to massive displacements of Kosova's rural population to urban areas, there is a general shortage of school space in towns. Some schools work in four shifts, with forty to forty-five pupils in a classroom and school classes lasting only twenty-five to thirty minutes. The *Gjon Serreçi* primary school in Ferizaj, for example, has about 3,800 pupils.

It was so nice and cozy. I used to take turns with my boys. Each of us would be the sun, and the others, the planets, would run around and around in orbits. There were different worlds we could endlessly visit, all of them, without exception, had rabbits, ice cream, and electricity. One of us would jump and declare that we had fallen into a black hole and then end up on some other planet. "You just pretend you're teaching them astronomy," my mother, a former teacher, once yelled when visiting me in Albania. We stayed there for five years after losing our jobs in Kosova. "You must not decide so quickly to stay home and raise kids," my mother would say, over and over.

During our game, one of the boys would inevitably say: "Can we jump home now?" This home he was referring to was a place they had only heard about. The boys had been born in Skopje, in Macedonia, across the border from Kosova. ("You even gave birth to them in a decent place, a real hospital, unlike your friends back there," my mother would go on, very much like a teacher. "You need to go back to work. You don't want to become a common housewife.") But I was sure that, far away from our real home, far from everything I had thought would be-

long to me forever, my boys needed me and I needed them. I was certain of this.

"Is that home?" one of the boys asked, startled, watching TV. The screen showed refugees at Bllace, a place on the Kosova-Macedonian border; they were fighting for a loaf of bread. The boys pointed their little fingers toward a mass of people, fighting for survival, massed together in complete meaninglessness and lack of power. "No," I said. "Home is strong. Now turn off the TV and let's jump home." We turned around and around and around in endless circles. (I wondered: How many more blows for them?)

"There is a powerful allure to being chosen for KEC training," says Halim, my officemate at the Kosova Education Center, a local NGO that works on training programs for teachers. KEC is located within the Faculty of Philology, where I had spent more than ten years of my life. There was a flood of foreign NGOs into post-war Kosova, though many of them only appeared on publications lists. I was very much relieved that KEC really existed, that it was home-grown, and that it resided in the building of the institution that made me grow up.

Halim, an elder pedagogue, says, "It may be postwar enthusiasm as well as accumulated frustration with the parallel school system. Whatever it is, it is our duty to match the strong will to change, to actually make changes, and we can do this faster than anyone can with some official decree, like the recent one about piloting the ninth grade all over Kosova. I doubt that this hasty proclamation will have any meaningful effect in the classroom." Halim shakes his head in disagreement. "You know, I am fascinated with one particular accomplishment of ours: when I visit a school, teachers who went through our training tell me that the pupils who used to be the best, the 'spoiled' ones, are not dominating any more. Those who used to be quiet, who were standing aside, are now expressing themselves. The teachers say they are even outperforming the A students." Halim sparkles. "I am sure that, one day, all of Kosova will be one big school, where all of us will be learning and learning." No matter how he begins his monologues, Halim inevitably ends them with this metaphor. He has repeated it a thousand times over the past two years. And it is strange that no matter how many times he has said that Kosova will be one big school, it has not become a dead metaphor for me. Every

time I hear it, I always envisage people who are living every moment, fulfilling their deep desire to learn and to know.

Halim is feeding a big dream with more fuel than the legions of foreign aid workers in their hundreds of white jeeps with international plates that jam the streets of Prishtina. Halim would never find a job in any of the international offices. None of the rapidly growing local institutions would hire him either because he doesn't speak English. I am happy he is with KEC. ("Do you want to throw all of us in the garbage," my mother, the elder school teacher, yells. "What about people who went to study in Belgrade, in Zagreb, even in Slovenia? Those milky faces shaking their ID cards around their necks have learned English cooking hamburgers.")

In June 1999, when the armed conflict in Kosova ended, more than 800,000 Albanian refugees started to come home. The new authorities decided to make up the lost second academic semester, which would delay the start of the 1999–2000 school year. The ravages of war had left no books for some 400,000 pupils in primary and secondary schools. A consortium of donors provided 3.2 million copies of about two hundred textbook titles.

At that time, Kosova was awash with international governmental agencies and NGOs seeking to promote programs in education. An initiative known as DESK (Developing the Education System in Kosovo) was launched at the end of 1999 as an advisory body. It provided a forum for Kosovars and internationals to discuss education issues. Later on, this process was officially abandoned and replaced by the lead agency concept, which made international donor agencies responsible for the development of certain education sectors.

"Did your American friend Susan send these planes?" my children ask, shouting and applauding the NATO forces flying over Tirana on their way to Kosova. Susan, worrying for me and my family in Tirana, had sent a package with water and hard biscuits. "Ma, tell us please how strong are the Americans? And don't just say they are frank and friendly, very frank and friendly, too frank and friendly. This is all you ever say."

In 1984, at the University of Chicago of all places, I was the one who was too frank and friendly when I told a student gathering: "I belong by faith to the Muslim religion, and by belief to the communist party." Though formally true, this unsavory frankness led to a lot of loneliness; but, in due course, I made some lifelong friends. And during the Kosova war they sent sparks into the big black hole in which I was living. (My mother again: "I can't believe you have found friends like this. One sends you water. Another sends you a swatch of her wedding dress, so that you can somehow partake in her wedding. And a third sends you a Bahai prayer book to save all of Kosova. Glad you didn't stay in Chicago. Maybe you would have completed a Ph.D. and become even stranger than you are now.")

My son chimes in, comparing the American and Albanian flags. "Ma, I want a flag with stars shining up in the sky. I think the eagle is ugly and wild. And it eats rabbits."

I ask Halim which schools have teachers trained in Step by Step and in Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking. On his list, the Ismail Qemali School catches my attention. "The stylish iron lady" is how they call the school's principal, Valbona. She always intrigued me. Entering the grounds of the freshly painted school, I pass a modern tennis court, a rarity in Prishtina. Muddy footprints follow me down the shiny floor of the corridor. Valbona's high-heels are clean. Her blue suit matches the curtain and carpet in her office. "Here you are. I have been waiting. You are ten minutes late," Valbona says. We shake hands. Sticks prop up the stems of the potted plants set before two big windows. Her suit and high heels are part of a statement. "I look good. I am smart and tough. I will show you the way." I try to squirrel my muddy shoes under the chair. "Let's go," she says. "Classes have just started." She rushes me out. "In a little while it will be three. I need my midday coffee." She stays at school for all three shifts, each one in high heels.

We enter a class of first graders working on cards for Mother's Day. "Oh, here is the director," declares a little girl, giving us a smile before going on with her work. I tell the teacher, Ymrane, that I would like my children to make me such a card. I know Ymrane from Skopje. We went to school together. She tells me how she felt an urge to do something new, to work differently with her pupils. "I knew all the time that I

needed to shape up. The kids should not be like us any more. They should enjoy school. The training made this far easier for me and I now have to sprint to implement new ideas.”

“When we started applying interactive teaching methods we ran into problems. Parents wanted to enroll their kids in the classes where these methods are used. This year, two out of three first-grade teachers apply those methods. I am seeking another teacher who is trained either in Step by Step or in Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking to avoid conflict with parents who reject teachers who apply traditional methods.”

A primary school director from Gjakova

“Working together in groups strengthens the sense of solidarity,” she says. “We seem to have become so money-oriented and selfish, as if we forgot the war.”

Ymrane and I kiss each other good-bye.

“Do not worry, ma, the number seventeen is lucky,” comments my little boy, climbing from one package to another. “I am sure we will have our own home after this,” he says. We are moving into our fourth apartment in Prishtina, which makes a total of seventeen in the three countries where we’ve lived and had similar experiences with landlords. “Ma,” he adds, “prices are high because of the Americans living here, and they are our friends, don’t you think so? You don’t want us leaving again, do you? I am doing okay at school, didn’t the principal say so?” (“I love your son’s humor,” the principal once told me, with a strong odor of brandy on his breath. My boy had to go through an interview in order to skip a grade and join his older brother. “You’d better take Skenderbeg down from the wall,” he told the principal, referring to an Albanian hero, who fought the Turks in the fifteenth century. “Turks think he was a bastard, and you do want them to help us, don’t you? This school doesn’t even have a gym.”) I told my son, “You were lucky he was drunk, even though he is most of the time. And you are not to use that kind of language for national heroes.” I try to rationalize it all, confused and exhausted. “My dear patriot

with batteries," he says, mimicking a sentence he heard on a popular local TV comedy.

"I prefer to keep a distance from my colleagues. About 95 percent of us are women, and if we start hugging, gossiping comes next, and no time for work is left." This is Valbona giving me a hint while we drink real Turkish coffee in smart porcelain cups. I blush like a schoolgirl and tell her that I have known Ymrane for more than twenty years. "I didn't mean this kind of hugging," Valbona answered. "Absolutely not. I simply meant that we have to work a lot. We have to work to catch up with all that has been lost, work a lot to change our schools. I am going to stay here all day every day until I see that school is not a torture for children. I want them coming out happy." Her voice is both self-assured and enchanting.

(Halim: "We have had cases where, in spite of investing a lot in teachers, principals without good managerial skills let it all go to waste. An individual matters, a dedicated individual who becomes part of the school life by identifying with the interests of everyone. This is neither easy nor simple to describe and furthermore no recipe for it exists." Halim would say this often to me during the training for management and administration.)

The Kosova Education Center (KEC) was founded in early 2000 by the Kosova Foundation for Open Society (KFOS). KEC has since become the most prominent education NGO in Kosova. It operates a number of education programs and donor-funded projects. In four years, KEC training programs reached more than one-third of the 23,000 educators in Kosova.

Valbona points to a file on her orderly desk: "Here are the ninth graders' opinions of children's rights. I worked with them as soon as I came out from KEC's training on children's rights." Then she added discretely, "The ninth-grade teachers were appointed from above without even consulting me. I use every opportunity to improve matters." Her anxious and also delightful voice goes on. "I am sure the students appreciate the new sports facilities. At their age sports activities mean so much. Next to the

tennis court there will be a swimming pool, for which I am raising funds. Have you already seen my gym-room?" Valbona goes on, tirelessly, until she walks me out, bids me good-bye, and turns back into the building. The tac-tac-tac of her high heels, in perfect rhythm, fades down the foot-printed corridor.

"Ma, you tell your friend Isuf that Dardi and Banny are now shouting more than the entire class. I bet they will become silly like us soon," exclaims my younger son coming out of school. His elder brother blushes when he sees Isuf smiling next to me. "Maybe you're right. Give me five," Isuf says. He has been in Kosova for a month now, back from New York after twenty years, to bring his sons and his American-Albanian wife to this Kosova he dreamed of for so long. "I gave them ancient Illyrian names, Dardan and Alban, and now the kids are shortening them just like they do in the U.S.," he complained to me during the first week they joined my kids at school. "They are telling me how children get up, stand straight, and declaim their names loudly with separate syllables. I had no idea you still do this," he said. His perplexed wife kept telling me she couldn't cook because of the unpredictable electricity restrictions.

At least the children are adapting, we say with amusement, the three of us, old friends from school, having lunch together for the first time in many, many years. The three of us—Isuf, Idriz, and I—were the best of friends. We loved literature. But Isuf and Idriz went away to the United States after the student demonstrations in the early eighties. "We were away, unlike you. Then why do you seem so disheartened, almost as we do? You were lucky to be able to stay home."

"Pupils have realized that the teacher is not the dominant person. He or she is rather a coordinator for them. Pupils like the fact that their life experiences are valuable for school. For social science, it is important. Pupils are not just learning abstract things. They can link everyday life with school."

A teacher in Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking

"Listen, you guys," I say, "you know how briefly our revolutionary attitude lasted, our enthusiasm to view literature away from the lens of tra-

ditionalism. It all became a dimwitted extravagance to me with everything else that was going on. I managed to motivate myself to analyze the internal monologue in prose and that is what I hate most now." We chuckle. "I hate internal monologue. It is chasing me everywhere. Sometimes I wish it didn't exist, don't you?"

Students cannot write a single sentence properly. The classrooms are cold. It is hard to find chalk much less computers, I grumble to my father, telling him about the University of Prishtina, where I returned after an eight-year absence. I wish we had your conditions, I keep complaining. My father teaches at the South-East University in Tetovo in Macedonia. "How do you have the nerve to be so unthankful?" my mother lets loose. "I heated my best room for your students, because you would not even dare go to private houses like everyone else." (During the academic year 1993–94, I taught linguistics at my parents' house to students in the English department. I was pregnant with my second child, and I got upset when I first saw my assigned classroom: no windows, no doors, broken chairs, logs on the floor for students to sit upon. I worried constantly that the police would carry out an "inspection." What would happen if I got frightened, what would happen to my baby? I kept worrying. The students were in the fourth year. There were only a few. We started to meet in my parents' home, where at least I didn't have to freeze and be fright-

A pilot school achieves its status through its potential for innovation and reform. There is not necessarily a pre-existing model for a pilot school, which can be applied, a kind of blueprint, which is taken for granted. Rather a pilot school is a concept, which should evolve into a reality, forged in collaboration with all those involved in the school and its life. Actors include the school director, the teachers, parents, the community, and the children themselves. The definition of the pilot school is thereby created by the actors themselves, on a school-by-school basis, rather than a generic "one size fits all" approach. Pilot schools are to be the testing grounds for reform of education in Kosova. Each intervention in each school will be subject to extensive research, monitoring, and evaluation, from the very start of the project. The idea is to promote dynamics and processes that can produce new knowledge and outcomes in the field of education where the subjects of change become the protagonists of reform.

The Pilot School Concept

ened. We drank coffee and chatted, which I guess added up to what people insist on nowadays—the interactive methodology—but I kept wishing they could have access to a real library, or at least books.)

“As for asking for computers, you should start cleaning the toilets first, if you want to call yourself a university,” my mother concluded. “And you make sure you do it yourself.”

It is 7:30 on a rainy Monday morning. I am going to see the Elena Gjika Elementary School and its new principal. The former principal was extremely supportive of teacher training programs and has recently been replaced. How were the teachers doing nowadays in this “pilot school”?

Children are streaming through the narrow streets of the crammed neighborhood, passing occasionally in front of big white jeeps jerking and bouncing over the potholes. The principal, bundled in his winter coat, waits for Dugi and me at the school’s steps. We pass through the corridor, its walls crowded with children’s artwork, and climb the stairs to the principal’s office. Both the computer and TV set are on. “The new methodology is great,” he says. “It makes all pupils active and we have had a 12-percent rise in final evaluation scores compared with last year’s. Parents are very cooperative. They even collected funds for two Step-by-Step classrooms furnished just like the three you have provided for us. They are anxious to include their children in the program, and they are eager to put them in our special French and German classes. Although the school works in three shifts and still has crowded classes, our pupils achieved the best results in this year’s municipal competitions. They have a very active children’s club for children’s rights. I want to maintain these results, and I hope there will be more support for my teachers.”

We find Nysrete (Ceti) ringed by six-year-olds, kneeling on colorful cushions spread over a clean carpet with amusement-park patterns covering half the classroom. The other half of the class has chairs grouped around four tables. Children’s photos, with names, birthdays, and personal information, are placed along the top of a wall, next to the white board, where it says Monday, February 10, in bright red writing. At the other side of the table, the wall is covered with a list of school rules. A bouncy girl with a ponytail gets out of the circle to make room for us next to a table. I fall in love with her, and with her name, Mjellma. It means “swan.” She removes her bag from a chair, pulls out another chair, gives us a smile and returns to her pillow, with her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. The teacher introduces us:

"This is Uncle Dugi, who teaches math, and Aunt Lindita, who teaches English."

Seeing her, I feel entranced. I go back, years and years, to when I was studying with her niece, Lili, whose parents would let us throw a party any time we wanted. They often suggested we visit "Aunt Ceti." She was my mother's friend, and came from her hometown, Dibra, in Macedonia. Nysrete was the daughter of the best-known teacher in the Dibra area. I had heard my mother's stories about Nysrete's parents and about how their home was always open for all children. "The father was put in prison for some time," my mother told me. "The day he came out, his pockets were full of candies, and he walked down the street throwing them to us and singing happily. The father, the famous teacher Esad Mezelxhiu, was always kind to us. And his wife," at this point in her story my mom would always sink into a homesick and longing tone, "always had a flower in her hair. There was always some kind of flower, and it made her look so caring and cute." My mother would go on and on. I understand, with the wisdom of age, that this is the deepest expression of care, like the true face of love. Nysrete's parents must have given her a lot just as she has a lot to give now. "Children, if today is Monday, February 10, what was yesterday? And what will tomorrow be?"

Some of the children are play-acting. "I love math," declares a little boy, sitting in a small chair opposite a little girl. "I think I know it best. I am the smartest." He gets the giggles from Mjellma, who tosses her ponytail around. The two kids in the center are acting as if they are sick. Their teacher had been ill and missed a day of classes. They are finding out what one does when someone is ill. "Shall I prepare you some tea?" asks the little boy, concerned. "Yes, but I would like chamomile," answers the little girl in a hoarse voice.

The little swan whispers to me, "What a taste!" I ask her wickedly, "Don't you want to go home? Don't you want to be with your mom now?" "No way," she answers. "The teacher was ill. We had another teacher all day. I missed her."

"What grade should we give our actors?" asks Nysrete. "An A," everyone shouts. She then sticks papers with words, written clearly and colorfully, all around the walls of the room and has the children use them to construct sentences. Nysrete goes to her desk in a corner of the classroom and comes back with a folder of tests. Each of the test sheets has an attractive drawing that Nysrete has made herself, just like the vibrant words

on the walls. The children keep reconstructing sentences, and then reading them all together. I look through the tests and see that each of them has a good grade and warm words from the teacher: "This is nice." "How wonderful." "This is so clever." A tiny girl approaches me. "Do you like reading? I love it a lot. I also write. I am Anda." Then she goes back to her cushion.

Someone knocks on the door. An elderly woman brings in a large basket with bread rolls and sets it on a table. One by one, the children pick up the rolls and say thank you. They sit around the tables and chat as they eat their breakfast. I go to speak to Nysrete, who has rolled up her sleeves. Suddenly a boy tugs on her slacks: "I want the cube. I want the cube." "Eat your roll first. I promise it will be the first thing we do next," she says. Nysrete takes a hardcover notebook from her desk. "See, I have written here that he is an only child. He is a bit impatient, a bit spoiled, but he will get over it. I have all my notes for them in the diary I keep each night. I have kept all the ones I've written during the 36 years of my career. Luckily they were not burnt during the war." "I want one more," another boy asks. "Let's see the basket, my dear, here are a couple more, take one." Nysrete turns to me. "He lost his father in the war and still wants a bit more attention."

After making a tour around the room, Nysrete goes on. "You must love the children and the work you do with them. You must enter their souls every day. When I meet them after a long time, my memory of them as pupils comes back vividly to me."

"I was the first generation to go through KEC's training for Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking. It changed everything. School was always my life. It was my father's last wish for me, his only child, to become a teacher. The training gave me all the tools I knew I lacked, so that I can pass on to these children the passion for learning more, for knowing more, for being always curious. I appreciate every opportunity there is to know and learn more."

"And how is Lili?" I can finally express my desire to hear about her niece, my old friend. She went abroad with her husband a long time ago. Nysrete turns to the impatient boy. "Just a little bit more, honey, then you can start working in your corner."

"Her husband got a Ph.D. at MIT," she says. "They will eventually come back home one day."

Lili was a talented writer. "What does she do?" I ask. "Does she still write?"

"She left me her poems. I use this one for Mother's Day. I have been using it since she left. Children love it, in particular the part that says 'Mother's Day is when her eyes spark.' You know, honey, there is a lot of heavy poetry in these textbooks, I don't want children to just parrot the words as if they were robots." She looks through the papers and pulls out another poem. "This one I use when we separate and they go on to the fifth grade. Lili wrote it about Dad. Maybe some of them will become teachers one day."

Seeing my cheerless face, she turns to the class. "This is such a rainy day. Do you feel like singing?"

Going out of the school, I can hear their voices.

"This is a great idea, Lindita," Halim says. I tell him how I've started an activity with my children and their best friends. There are five of them, all lively, all bored at school, all thrilled by Counterstrike and other games. "Ma, it is not their fault, all their bad grades. They do not know how to learn. They never read with their minds really in the book," my Valdriin announces after I tell him the language teacher had complained at the parents' meeting. "Maybe I can bring them over to read our books? I would like to show them my house, now that it's all ours."

So I did it. And once I had, one of the mothers called me and told me she wanted to do math with them. She is an architect. And in a couple of weeks, another mother wanted to do civic education, because she finds it important. Our five kids love it. We cook their favorite dishes and bake lots of cookies. They can play and jump around the house. I read *Spider-man* and *Winnie-the-Pooh* with them, to explain to them how grammar works. They look doubtfully at these books: "Is this a good enough book for school?" Then the kids with the bad grades comment about how passive verbs do not necessarily show lack of activity and give me cute philosophical comments. Then they run down the list of the figures of speech.

"Maybe your teacher was a little confused," I say. "Just look carefully, figures of speech are not decoration. Language is never decoration. It is in your heads and it is you. What about Harry Potter then? What is his magic wand, don't we all want one?"

"Hurray," they shout, when I announce that a University of Magic had recently opened in Austria, just like Hogwarts. (I made sure my husband

and my mother were out of earshot.) We all decide we'll someday become magicians. Until then, we'll read Potter.

Halim listens carefully. "This kind of initiative may be introduced into the schools. We advise our trainees to cooperate with the community and in particular with the families. In the meantime, be careful. You should let them be a little free at first. Step by step, let them be independent. You have been obsessed and even possessive with your children and I know why. Don't worry, I understand." Halim did understand. He knew home schooling. His Pedagogical Institute had been the soul of Kosova's parallel school system during the 1990s. "It was all about survival," Halim said. "Yes, it was strength, camaraderie, courage, work, hope, rebirth, but not a real school. You cannot learn without being free. It was self-protection and you can only become a hedgehog when you focus on self-defense. You can easily become the same kind of burden for your children that school is, if you insist on inflicting your escape into this fantasy. Administer it in careful doses. You get free of it yourself, and let children get free of it. We need free leaders for our future."

"The Step by Step training made me change my attitude. Now, my approach to children is different, and I try to help them gain new knowledge independently rather than serve it to them readymade. Teaching and learning with this program are so different that I envy those kids who have had an opportunity to be part of it."

A Step by Step Trained Teacher

"Approach our teachers carefully, my dear," Halim cautioned. "You keep complaining like a spoiled child about them. Don't forget that in an instant they went from being heroes to beggars. They were not ready for their new role, for the bare truth after decades of being the 'backbone of the nation.' They have to make it all up while struggling, like everyone else, with the demands of everyday life, with a far worse social status. If they lost someone in the war, they have to carry on, and help others. Do you ever think who in the hell thinks about their needs, about the needs of those who raise a whole society? Do we want to become a mob? If not, their wounds need healing." Breathing hard then, Halim slows down. "It is not only Western teaching techniques we are presenting in our training. We owe this to them who believe in us, who have entrusted us with these reforms, rather than to some official institution. Training could even be a

therapy, a cure from fear of absolute authority that has been inside us for decades and centuries. We have to be everything, trainers, social workers, psychologists, so that they become everything for the children at school. Isn't this your passion? Soon, Kosova will be a big homeschool where all of us will be learning." I hear his conclusion and listen. Never, not ever, has it sounded like an empty slogan to me.

No Need to Hurry Up?

By Petya Kabakchieva, Bulgaria

Prologue

In February 2002, a small but highly vocal group of high school students took to the streets of Sofia to protest against the introduction of external graduation examinations that summer. Nothing new in this: Examinations arouse strong feelings among students and parents anywhere, and where change seems to threaten the comfortable expectations of those who know how to exploit the status quo, those feelings soon spill over into the media and then onto the streets. Similar scenes greeted exam reforms in Romania, in Slovenia, and elsewhere in the region, but as soon as it became clear that the new systems in those countries would be more fair, more transparent, and better for education quality . . . in short, as soon as the threat of uncertainty evaporated, so did the protests. But not in Bulgaria. The February 2002 protests once again stopped reform in its tracks. It is still stalled as I write this, in 2004. Why? Is it just “reform fatigue”? Are Bulgarian people more traumatized by change, more afraid of uncertainty than their neighbors? Is it lack of consistent leadership? After all, there have been more than a dozen ministers of education in Bulgaria since 1989. Is it the hidden influence of those who benefit from the status quo in terms of power or money?

This story looks for answers, using the history of exam reform as a Bulgarian case study, because in education it is often the “vital dragon” of examinations that either drives—or kills—change.

“Let’s Make a Bet: Will Exam Reform Ever Happen?”

Efforts to introduce external assessment, including matriculation exams, have a long and inglorious history in Bulgaria. The pattern seems to be the same each time: agreement in principle that such a system is needed, followed by endless postponement of its actual introduction. As early as 1991, the National Education Act—along with providing for changes in the curriculum and introduction of national education standards—decreed that Bulgarian secondary education must end with a compulsory matriculation exam. In 1999, it was decided to introduce matriculation exams in 2003. In 2003, this plan was cancelled. In 2004, there was a new decision: yes, there *will* be compulsory matriculation exams—in 2006. True to the familiar pattern, though, who knows whether they will not be postponed again—to 2009, or even 2014. Bulgaria’s first compulsory matriculation exam has become a bit of a joke and a betting occasion. When will it happen? Will it happen at all?

Behind the betting game, however, lies a much more serious issue: How are education reforms conducted in postcommunist countries? Who favors reform and who opposes it? If there is agreement that reforms are necessary, why don’t they happen? Where does the resistance come from? Whose interests does it serve to oppose reform?

The Illusion

These were the basic questions that in 2002 confronted a team of social scientists¹ to which I belonged. We had won a competition organized by the Open Society Institute–Sofia to monitor the Education Modernization Project (EMP), which had been launched in January 2001 with World Bank financing. We were academics; the team was led by the country’s youngest professor in social sciences (in our case, “the youngest” means “in his forties”), an energetic and ambitious man, keen to complete the

¹ The project “Monitoring and Evaluation of the Education Modernization Project Activities,” led by Prof. Georgi Dimitrov, was discontinued in 2003 when it became clear that there was nothing left to monitor. The loan agreement for the project was terminated with the consent of both parties in December of the same year. Our project was transformed into a research project entitled “Institutional Resources for (Non)Implementing Social Reforms” with the support once again of the Open Society Institute–Sofia.

work, uncompromising in his conviction that scientific knowledge and human decency should prevail over everything else.

We started monitoring EMP activities with enthusiasm, expecting to find similar enthusiasm in those who conducted the reform. Whether reform was necessary in the first place was not an issue for us. We were already convinced that reform had to take place, because we had experienced the ideological rigidity of communist-style education, which punished every attempt to stray from the “crystal clear” truth. We were convinced because the world in which our children live now is completely different from the one we knew. The world today is open to numerous cultures. It is a world of new technologies and the unobstructed flow of information. A world that calls for a completely different type of education and school organization.

For us, changes in the content of the curriculum were important, but changes to the socialization aspects of Bulgarian education were even more important. Education needed to create individuals capable of critical thinking, rather than merely memorizing facts; analytical, rather than conforming; inquisitive, curious, not ready to agree unconditionally with prevailing norms; searching for answers, not accepting readymade solutions. Individuals open to diversity and change, rather than focused on stagnant truths. Thinking people to whom information is a resource, rather than goal in itself. For us, it was precisely this change in the “hidden curriculum” that required equally profound changes in the official curricula, in teaching methods, in writing new and different textbooks.

But diversity does not mean that everything is possible. Quite the opposite; diversity requires that good practices are measured against bad ones. For us, therefore, the introduction of a national external assessment system was not only an obvious necessity for ensuring quality in Bulgarian education, beyond the subjectivity of grades given by teachers. It was also the key to education reform in Bulgaria. It would give a clear picture of the real status of Bulgarian education, and it could be a catalyst for change throughout the system. It could, for example, lead to the adoption of new principles in providing financial incentives to teachers—better pay for better work—so that everybody is motivated to improve their performance. This, in turn, would highlight the urgent need for better in-service teacher training. It would provoke a debate on the link between general and higher education: if general education *really* produces good students, then why shouldn’t they be allowed to enter university on the basis of their matriculation exam results? Exams would introduce uni-

form criteria for the entire school network, making it less painful to close down schools in which the quality of teaching is obviously below standard.

We believed that if the real level of education of children from different regions, towns, and villages could be reliably assessed, a serious national debate would ensue about what is being taught in schools, why, and how; and parents and students would become more actively involved in the education process. In short, we believed that the introduction of external assessment would provoke not only changes in education, but in civic activity, too.

This is how we saw the priorities of education reform. We were happy to discover that the Education Modernization Project shared our thinking and our beliefs.

The Reality

In practice, however, quite the opposite happened. The introduction of external assessment did provoke civic activity, but for the wrong reasons. In February and March 2002, hundreds of students took to the streets in protest against the introduction of matriculation exams. In a meeting with the protesters in April, the minister of education pledged to reconsider his position. In November 2002, in a case against the exams brought by the Committee for Clarity in Bulgarian Education, the court ruled in favor of retracting compulsory matriculation exams.

In a country allegedly yearning for change, civil society used the law to oppose change. How did this happen, and why?

A year later, the EMP was formally closed down or “discontinued by mutual agreement,” as it was officially put. Again: how did this happen, and why?

Taking advantage of my involvement as a member of the monitoring team, I will look for answers. The first place to look is in “the corridors of power,” the gloomy labyrinth of Bulgaria’s Ministry of Education and Science.

Education as a “Fortress”

In Bulgaria, it is easier to revoke matriculation exams than it is to enter and exit the Ministry of Education to interview an official.

The Ministry of Education and Science in Sofia is housed in an overbearing white stone building, with a huge door, nearly four meters high, built in the Stalinist neoclassicism of the 1950s and designed to make those who enter feel small and insignificant. Once you get through the door, you have to pass through a series of checkpoints before you actually enter the building: a security guard, then a door-keeper, then an automated system for access to the stairway and the lifts. An unapproachable fortress.

My key to the fortress was a letter signed by the minister himself, obtained with the help of the Open Society Institute–Sofia, which has a cooperation agreement with the ministry. I will not dwell on the numerous conversations, requests, and explanations that were needed before the sacred Sesame finally opened. (It turned out that it is difficult not only to enter, but also to exit the ministry building. To enter, you need to get a note signed by the person whom you are scheduled to meet; but in order to leave, closing Sesame behind you, you need *another* document signed by a high-ranking government official and indicating the time of exit. This is why, after the interviews, I spent a full hour looking for someone to sign the exit document for me; otherwise, I might be there still.)

So, one way or another, I finally got into the building and found myself wandering along broad corridors with high ceilings that inspire awe for the bureaucratic sacrament. Then I entered into huge offices equipped with large desks and soft armchairs, populated by various people. These people turned out to be well-meaning. And surprised.

Half of them had never heard of the Education Modernization Project and shook their heads apologetically.

“Well, you see,” one said, “I am new here, on the team of the new minister. We are still finding our way around.”

“How many of you are newly appointed?”

“Well, quite a few,” she apologized, “probably around 100 people. You know how it is; the new team needs to have confidence in the people they work with.”

“But isn’t there an archive?” I asked. “Do you mean to say that you are starting from scratch?”

“An archive? Well, no, there isn’t. When people leave, they take their files with them. There is no institutional memory.”

Worst of all, in addition to being unaware of previous innovative work, many people at the ministry were convinced that no change was necessary. Some who *had* heard about the EMP shook their heads with skepticism. “Modernization of education? Reform? Why do we need it? Our education system has such good traditions; look at the results of our students at international Olympiads, why should we change anything? What we need are just better material resources.”

“What change, what reform? Foreigners come and dream up all sorts of reforms, they say that this, that, and everything else has to change. We are overburdened with routine work here—look how much paperwork we have, how many letters. People come from all over the country, we need to pay attention to them. I just have no time to think about reforms.”

“Modernization of education means computerization of education. That’s all there is.” So stated, with ostensible competence, the head of the EMP Coordination Unit, a large, self-confident young man who seemed convinced that he had an answer to everything.

We were surprised by the resistance to reforms. But when we looked again at the Bulgarian translation of the EMP Appraisal Document (which is negotiated and agreed upon by the government of Bulgaria and the World Bank before the start of any project), we discovered that the word “modernization” is translated as “improvement,” precisely because Bulgarian education allegedly has good traditions. It should not be changed, just improved a little, perhaps with a few computers here and there.

Given this attitude among ministry staff, it did not come as a surprise that the media had no clear vision of what “reform” meant in Bulgarian education. The ministry’s public relations people were confused by contradictory internal opinions, while the concept, objectives, and activities of EMP were shrouded in secrecy. The media covered only rumors and scandals, and occasionally certain views of the minister, expressed in different ways for different media, including *Playboy* magazine.

Much Sound and Fury, But No Exams

Inevitably, a lack of any common vision of reform caused people to become worried and suspicious. “Why do we need it at all?” they insisted on asking.

An article about the 2002 protests in a Bulgarian daily had the headline “Matriculation Exams Turned Hateful due to Sheer Negligence.” It began: “This girl is protesting against matriculation exams because no one has explained to her that they are useful.” The article stated that the people who had to provide the explanation were still unable to answer all the questions, concluding, “Thus, the whole matriculation exam idea was undermined.”

The article provoked comments clearly showing that the public opposed matriculation exams and, more importantly, education reform in general: “I believe that all changes in our general education should be prohibited and we should revert to the old and proven curricula,” one person wrote. “I am disgusted and scandalized by everything that has been done in this sphere in the last twelve years.”

I was taken aback by the strength of this fixation on the traditions of Bulgarian education, by the unwillingness to change anything. Why are we clinging so desperately to education as a sacred and precious heritage of our ancestors? I suppose people long for something they know, something stable when everything else is being turned on its head. The whole world is changing, the past of entire generations is collapsing, hope for a new future is emerging, but the present is insecure: familiarity is comforting, a “security blanket” against the cold winds of change.

The Politics of Survival

The first serious economic crisis hit Bulgaria in 1990–1991 and so did the first serious political clashes. People used to queue for bread and milk during the night, and shout desperately at rallies during the day, some urging change, others trying to defend the past, usually their own past. The second crisis came at the end of 1996 and the beginning of 1997. The average salary dropped to US\$3–4 per month. The citizens of Sofia stormed the Parliament building, and university students swarmed the streets, peacefully—but unyieldingly—blocking all traffic until the government resigned. The people, absorbed by their political feuds, desperate

to ensure their economic survival, striving to adapt to the changing environment, thought there were so many other important problems to worry about. Education was a guardian of our traditions. Why should we change it, too?

This was all very convenient—it seemed honorable, even patriotic, and it saved everyone the trouble of doing something. While elsewhere in the world education was a driving force for change and “the knowledge society” was gaining ground, in Bulgaria education turned away from reform and refused to exert an influence on our postcommunist lives.

Still, because we could not ignore Western countries, a bogus reform effort was launched, while in actual fact the *status quo* was being preserved. Part of this imitation exercise, we came to understand, was the “on/off” game with the matriculation exams.

While adults were coping with their changing lives, relying on the stability of education and cultural traditions, the children, fed up with the boring rigidity of the school, scampered off to game sessions, computer centers, and Internet clubs, or just dropped out looking for entertainment or, if they were lucky, employment. The number of dropouts began to grow alarmingly, and the TIMSS assessment showed a rapid deterioration of the level of education. The most ambitious students realized that the road to success was foreign exams like the SAT and TOEFL, and set about studying for them, writing off national education and aiming for a future abroad.

The Hidden Conflict of Interests

But the resistance against matriculation exams is not simply an attempt to find stability in a changing world. It is driven by plain, albeit hidden, vested interests in the *status quo*. I could discern these interests in the discussions I had with the chairperson of the Committee for Clarity in Bulgarian Education, which sued the Ministry of Education and Science in 2002 and in effect managed to revoke matriculation exams, and with the first director of the National Assessment Unit, who since 1994 has been an enthusiastic proponent of external assessment. These interests can also be seen on the website of the Committee for Clarity in Bulgarian Education.

Let us begin with the website. In 2002, those participating on website bulletin boards were mainly final-year students at elite foreign-language

teaching high schools, who would have been the first to sit for compulsory matriculation exams in 2003. The leitmotif of their web statements was: “Why do they insist on keeping me busy with matriculation exams, when I have to sit for the SAT and TOEFL?” Two years later, the main organizer of the anti-exam protest is a student in a prestigious American university, and most of the other participants are also abroad. The website is now seldom visited.

Still, I manage to track down one of the former protesters, now a first-year philosophy student at the University of Sofia, a tall, slender boy, dressed in designer clothes, intelligent, a foreign-language school graduate. I ask him what he thinks about matriculation exams in principle, and about the first matriculation exams that were revoked as a result of the 2002 protests.

“Look, these are two separate issues. Every logical person would support matriculation exams. After all, I am fully aware of how we got our grades. When you know that you will be assessed not by your teachers, but by somebody else, you will study more diligently, without the need for ‘sweet talk’ and figuring out hidden agendas. So I am not against matriculation exams in principle. The problem was that our class studied two curricula, an old one and a new one. In the middle of eighth grade we were suddenly informed that we were now in ninth grade; we simply skipped half of the eighth grade program and continued with ninth grade textbooks. The teachers were shocked and didn’t know which lessons to cut and which to keep in the transition from one curriculum to the other. We just stopped studying. How can you be expected to sit for exams based on a curriculum that was not covered in the classroom? And it wasn’t even clear what would be included in the matriculation exams. So our protests were perfectly justified. And, of course, if I had had to sit for matriculation exams as well as university entrance exams, I would have had to take more private lessons. I really don’t know how my parents would have coped with all this financially. I think that the Ministry of Education and Science should have postponed the exams for us, but carried on with the preparations and introduced them for subsequent classes. Still, it would be better for matriculation exams to serve as an entry qualification for the university, so that students would not have to prepare for several exams.”

Both the website and the comments of this boy are revealing. There are, of course, students from less prestigious high schools or from smaller communities who are afraid that they would fail the matriculation exams

because of the poorer quality of their education. But they were not the ones who organized the protests. Those who protested were ambitious students who were not afraid to sit for matriculation exams, but saw no purpose in them unless the exams served as entry to the university. Otherwise, they were a waste of time and multiplied the money they spent on private lessons. This in itself is an unfortunate indicator for the quality of Bulgarian education. It is a commonly accepted fact that you cannot enter the university without having taken private lessons. To get free (state) higher education, you have to invest a lot of money during your “free” secondary education. And those who cannot afford private lessons during their “free” secondary education do less well in their entrance exams and end up having to pay to study in private universities.

In 2002, it was unclear whether matriculation exams could serve as an entry for the university. Universities strongly opposed the idea. No surprise there—many university professors make money from the university entry exams, by special tutoring and other, less obvious means. Now, in 2004, things are still no clearer.

This was the reason why those who protested called their forum, later organized as an NGO, the Committee for Clarity in Bulgarian Education.

The Parents: We Need Clarity, But There Is No Need to Hurry Up

I meet the chairperson of the Committee for Clarity in a coffee shop. She is a woman in her mid-forties who smiles all the time and looks people in the eye rather insistently. Sometimes this look bothers me. In a “show, don’t tell” fashion, she has brought with her two plastic bags and a document case full of diplomas, papers, and court decisions to convince me that she is right.

“The introduction of matriculation exams in 2003 was a misunderstanding. It ran totally against the Curriculum Act. So many transgressions were committed that I cannot begin to describe them. Are these people at the ministry so utterly unaware of the regulatory framework? All the diplomas had to record a four-year course of studies, even though some of the students had actually studied for five years. Look at the diplomas they have issued.”

She shows me a diploma from the Sofia High School of Mathematics. The title page says, “Basic Education Certificate issued on July 1, 2000,”

but the secondary education diploma itself is dated June 2, 2003 and records *four* years of high school study. She gives me her piercing look.

"Tell me how it is possible after three calendar years to issue a diploma that covers four years of study? That is why we protested. The class of 2003 actually studied both the old curriculum and the new curriculum, which meant neither the old nor the new. How could these children sit for matriculation exams when the curriculum they studied was not clear, and there were no assessment standards? Are these real matriculation exams? Is this a real reform?"

She has read our monitoring reports and fully agrees with our conclusion that reforms are being "faked," rather than implemented for real. I have the feeling that she has read everything that has to do with education. Her explanation is simple.

"I am unemployed. I am a sport shooting coach, but I have always spoken my mind and this is why they downsized me. I joined the protest because of my older daughter, a victim of this system, who was then a student in the Sofia High School of Mathematics. And as I didn't have a job, I decided to take up this issue, so that some order could be introduced in our education system. We organized protests, we ended up in court, and we won. So, now this cause became my fate. And my job."

"Which cause?" I ask her.

"What do you mean 'which cause'?" she replies in sincere surprise. "The reform, of course! You and I are on the same side. We want reform in education, *and* clarity."

Now I am surprised. I have read her statements in the press, and I know that she thinks that matriculation exams should be introduced in . . . 2014! Can it be that we both want reforms, but that we have different views as to how they should be conducted? Our monitoring team, as I mentioned earlier, believes that it is external assessment that should spur reforms. Her views are completely the opposite: a systematic person, she wants things to happen in an orderly sequence.

"Of course, there should be external assessment, because right now students are being evaluated with so much subjectivity. But before we introduce external assessment, we should first make sure that the content of the education and the assessment criteria are very clear. Only then can we begin introducing external assessment, starting from the first grade, so that the children can get used to the new system. The development and actual implementation would take at least ten years. Only those children who started first grade with a unified assessment system would graduate

twelfth grade with a secondary education consistent with modern education standards. If we set the minimum criteria for the general education in each grade and begin introducing the new standards right now, we would see the results in ten years . . . in 2014. There is no time to lose!”

“But this means that for another twelve years we won’t know what the real outcomes of our education system are. And who will start that orderly reform? Do you mean that we should return to the beginning? Isn’t that a loss of time? What about the children who are in school now? Why should they have to wait?”

“There is no need to hurry up,” she replies. “Everything in our country is done hastily and thoughtlessly. Why was it necessary to put the kids into such a situation? Because it would have created a new demand for private lessons in matriculation exam subjects. But whether the results would reflect students’ real achievements or not—who cares? Those who could afford private lessons would have taken the matriculation exams. And the poor children wouldn’t. The whole system should be changed. It should not be necessary for a student to take private lessons to take either the matriculation or university exams. Teachers should do their jobs thoroughly. What we have now is a fake, an imitation of reform. And matriculation exams would have been an imitation of external assessment. It should start from the beginning.”

“But this is the whole point,” I say. “How do you change an education system? Where do you start? Who are the reformers? The previous government changed some of the curricula, they expressed the will for introducing external assessment. Okay, there were mistakes. But do we really have to start everything again, from the beginning?”

“Who are the reformers?” you ask. They are people like us. There should be an independent national assessment agency to organize the exams. Our own organization—we are now the National Union for Civil Control over Institutions—has even developed a project for such a body. We have submitted it to the Ministry of Education and Science. The new minister said that it was ‘interesting,’ but as yet we have received no official reply. We are ready to submit it to the Open Society Institute, too. This independent national assessment agency could easily be a private body. And then we would be ready to implement reforms.”

Looking for Leadership

Suddenly I felt irritated by all this “we” talk. Suggestions like the one for an independent national assessment agency have been around since 1994. It has received international funding, including several million dollars from the Education Modernization Project loan. But some of the people who would be responsible for making this reform happen do not want it to happen. They are only interested in “the best traditions of Bulgarian education,” not in whether “the best traditions” still serve the needs of young people in the new Bulgaria. Others, like the woman with whom I had spoken, say they want reforms, but in practice defend the status quo. Probably they have their interests, too.

In search of enthusiastic proponents of the reform, I find Georgi, one of the strongest defenders of national assessment and exams since 1994. Again, in good South East European style, we meet over a cup of coffee. He is a short-tempered man, perhaps too direct, rather uncompromising. “I have seen both good and bad,” he says. “I resigned from a good job; I am not well paid now but I am at peace with myself. However, I feel for the fate of education.” And indeed, whenever we discuss education issues, he tends to get more nervous than usual and his words become harsh, even rude at times. He starts his story.

“I have a degree in mathematics and I was working as a teacher. When the political situation changed in 1989, I became very excited, thinking that finally something real was going to happen. Change, however, is a very, very long process. In 1994, I joined the newly established Test Development Center. Our first test for the foreign-language teaching high schools was not a success. We developed it very hastily and we failed. Our work depended on the textbooks. For instance, my proposal to assess whether students were able to distinguish between a fact and opinion was not accepted, because allegedly such a distinction did not exist in the textbooks. Eventually, the Center was closed down.

“With the government of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, everything came to a halt. But when the Union of Democratic Forces came to power, we started developing the Education Modernization Project together with experts and a loan from the World Bank. By now, it was 1998; we had already lost four years. The Open Society Foundation–Sofia financed some of the preparatory seminars. We designed a strategy for the development of secondary education, with external assessment an intrinsic element. This is how the National Assessment Unit was created, and I

was appointed its director. Immediately we started to develop the matriculation exam kits, together with Dutch consultants from the CITO Group. We organized two pilot matriculation exams before launching the national one, but, alas, yet another new government appointed yet another new minister, who disagreed with us on a lot of things. He was against our tests as a form of assessment, which was only natural, since his own textbook couldn't fit into any test. I could not bear to watch the destruction of everything we had worked for, and early in 2002 I resigned.

"I admit that I have made mistakes. But I have always wanted to introduce external assessment and have struggled for years to start the process. Because what we have now is intolerable. Every teacher gives whatever marks she or he sees fit. Assessment is turned into an instrument to exert power: I like you, so you get an excellent mark; I don't like you because you ask too many questions, so you get only a passing grade. Or in other cases, the teacher wants to be nice to the kids and not frustrate them, as I myself have done many times, so all of a sudden the bottom mark in the class is 'good' and there are many 'excellent' students. External assessment means objective control. It means that teachers would know that eventually an external test would expose an undeserved 'good' or 'excellent' mark. The very thought of external assessment would make teachers feel more responsible."

"So how do you explain the strong resistance against matriculation exams?" I ask him.

"No teacher wants to be 'controlled.' If we introduce external assessment, we would inevitably evaluate teachers' performances too. There would have to be a new evaluation and promotion system: if your results are good, you get a raise; if not, you get fired. How many teachers would be eager to support such a reform? Of course, they would resist. How can we expect otherwise? The situation with the students is quite similar. Why, they say, do we need to be assessed objectively, when we are doing just fine as it is, getting our marks any old way from the teachers? Textbook writers do not have much interest in supporting external assessment either, because it would reveal the shortcomings of their textbooks.

"To put it bluntly, conducting reforms is a difficult and unrewarding task. Moreover, each government starts again from the beginning and discards the efforts of its predecessors. I think that our problem as a country is that we are no longer a communist state, but we are not a truly democratic one either. Had we been a communist or an authoritarian state, matriculation exams would have been introduced centrally with a direct

order, and that would be it: an obligatory national state matriculation exam. But, thank God, we are no longer like that. First of all, we are a lawful state and we respect the decisions of the court. Secondly, we cannot ignore the opinions of teachers, parents, and students. The problem is that we still go by the outer form, rather than try to reform from within; we don't look for the real meaning of what we want to accomplish. We stick to our narrow group and individual interests, rather than think what would be best for everyone."

"Do you believe that an external assessment system will be introduced at all? And if so, when?"

"There should be an independent national assessment agency to organize the exams. Why is it that people sit for American exams like the SAT, and don't protest? This is what we should have here, too. The actual administration of the tests should be done by the Regional Inspectorates, and the completed tests should be sent to that independent national agency where they will be marked by trained professionals according to clear criteria.

"You are asking, when? Well, of course, by law this reform should have been done already, but I am beginning to lose hope that it will ever happen. Look, this is what motivated me to get back into politics, to join a newly established party, because education reform is about our children."

Back to the Beginning—Will the “On/Off” Exams Game Ever End?

The year 2004 saw more critical articles on the problems of Bulgarian education. The failure of the World Bank's education modernization loan did not provoke a huge outcry, because the loan was officially "discontinued," having "exhausted its goals," but it did stir the seemingly calm surface of Bulgarian education. The ambitious young professor and I tried to turn the stir into a wave, giving interviews here and there, some of which managed to see the light of day. Parents gradually came out of their nostalgic fixation with Bulgarian education traditions and began to understand that something was wrong with the education of their children. Teachers too grew tired of the "on/off" game and wanted their voices to be heard. The ministry, realizing that it should communicate more actively with them, initiated an on-line discussion of new curricula.

In the beginning of 2004, a “General Education Development Strategy” was launched for the first time and posted for public discussion.

Proposed amendments to the Public Education Act envisage the introduction of an external assessment system after grades four, eight, and twelve, starting in 2006. And because nothing in Bulgarian education seems to happen without a blunder, it was initially proposed that “national exams” be introduced *before* first grade, to “assess children’s capacity”—an obviously foolish idea that luckily seems to have been abandoned. One way or another a consensus seems to have been reached (one wonders whether this time it’s for real!) that external assessment is necessary, and must be introduced in 2006. Can it be done?

Let’s have another look at comments posted recently in the readers’ forum of *Sega Daily*, referring to yet another article on external assessment published in May 2004 under the title: “National Exams Will Assess the Quality of Education. The Education Ministry Plans to Introduce Matriculation Exams after Grades Four and Eight in 2006.”

“Education Ministry officials fit perfectly into the saying that silly people never tire!” one reader wrote. “Admissions exams for first grade, various matriculation exams between grades seven and twelve . . . you name it. Since it is obvious that you don’t know what you want to achieve, better leave everything as it is. You have driven everyone crazy—children, teachers, parents.”

“Why should all good ideas be met with resistance?” another reader asked. “The idea to introduce exams is great. Why do I think so?” The reader cites four reasons. “First, the expenses for primary, basic and secondary education are covered by us, the taxpayers. It is only natural that we would want to know how our money is spent and this is precisely what the exams will show. Second, each parent would like to know which school would be capable of giving the best education to his or her child. The most objective criterion to assess this would be the results of the national exams, which would apply unified criteria. Third, it would become clear which teachers do their jobs well and which do not. I hope that the best would be given recognition (and financial benefits), while the worst would see the school door only from the outside. Such exams are a good way to determine who deserves more and who has to go. And fourth, without exams some people would graduate from secondary school illiterate and poorly educated, and it would be too late to do anything. It is clear even now that poorly educated people (regardless of whether they have a diploma or not) can hardly find their place in society.”

Two things can be discerned here. On the one hand, in the first comment, we can see the old drive to revert to the traditions of Bulgarian education. But there is also something new, embodied in the phrase: “Since it is obvious that you don’t know what you want to achieve, better leave everything as it is.” We can see once again how “on/off” games undermine the reform effort: if something is uncertain—started up and then abandoned—people cling to the status quo. People really do want to have clarity about what is being done about their children’s education and why. They also need to know that once started, reforms will be carried through, not abandoned half-way due to changes in the Cabinet or to protests from a few people with interests of their own.

Secondly, and more importantly, we are beginning to see that some people—probably by themselves, without any projects or strategies—have reached an understanding that external assessment is useful. We can only regret that the ministry and the media did not help them reach it earlier.

So. Shall we make a bet when matriculation exams will happen in Bulgaria? I bet on 2009. What about you?

Rites of Passage: Reforming the Matura Exam

By Ivan Lorenčič, Slovenia

A Tradition Reborn

June 1991 was the end of my ninth school year as principal of the Second General High School in Maribor, Slovenia's second largest city. Everyone—especially the graduates—is always nervous at the end of a school year, but 1991 was unprecedented, filled with tension. Slovenia was about to break away from Yugoslavia and nobody could say what this move would bring. The anxiety among high school students, however, went beyond political uncertainties and pregraduation jitters. The fourth-year students were on strike. For seven days, they occupied the streets. They took their discontent into the city's squares. They gathered in front of our school. They considered me an ally and called upon me to support their cause. They wanted me to join them in opposing the government's attempt to reintroduce compulsory final examinations at almost the same time as college entrance examinations.

The strike surprised us. We saw the reintroduction of a final examination as the return of something that for more than one hundred years—from the time when portraits of Emperor Franz Josef of Austria-Hungary hung in the classrooms—had been known to students and teachers in Slovenia as the *matura* exam, a demanding rite of passage, a kind of proof that a person had matured. In the first Yugoslavia—the period from 1918 to 1941, when pictures of Serbian kings hung above the chalkboards—the matura was the nightmare of many a student. And after the real nightmare of World War II, the matura haunted students in the second Yugoslavia, the Yugoslavia in which Tito's portraits decorated every schoolroom. So generation upon generation of Slovenes—meticulous, diligent, enamored with order, or believing themselves to be so—had come to know the matura as if it were a feature of our alpine landscape, a

peak each of our two million people had to climb once in a lifetime to do his or her part to protect our language and culture from being diluted by the larger, more dominant cultures beyond our mountains.

The introduction of a “career preparation” education system across Yugoslavia in the 1980s broke the matura tradition in Slovenia. Teachers were allowed to determine the content of the subjects they taught. Frequently students from the same school, including mine, graduated with vastly different exposures to various subjects. As a physics teacher, for example, I had given short shrift to the chapter on astronomy while my colleague, an astronomer, had transported his students into the deepest corners of the universe.

The student strike achieved its goal. It prevented the addition of the matura to the battery of tests the students were already taking. As a result, the state education authorities appointed an expert council to rethink the plan to reintroduce the matura. In July 1991, barely a month after Slovenia had achieved independence, this council adopted a plan for introducing a different kind of matura: a state examination required of all Slovenian high school students who wished to continue their studies at university. This matura would replace the university entrance examinations. It would test five subjects, three of them compulsory (the Slovenian language, a foreign language, and mathematics) and two others chosen by the student from subjects in the high school program. Besides a written section, the examination would include lab work in the natural sciences; projects; seminars in psychology, philosophy, and sociology; and oral exams. The deadline for introducing the matura was set for the spring of 1995.

It seemed a far horizon. Some Slovenes received the announcement with skepticism, others with approval, few with an awareness of the work needed to prepare and implement the project. A number of questions sprang into my mind: Would we have the matura ready to administer in 1995? What were teachers to teach? How would the test be graded? How would we ensure confidentiality? Who would deliver the tests to the schools? Would students take to the streets again? Would we be able to manage the financial aspects of such a project without foreign resources? I chased away my doubts by thinking: the matura is not my problem. I was a mere school principal. Soon, however, the matura tested me.

Possible

Intensive preparations should have begun on the matura in July 1991. Instead, all activities stopped. I remember being occupied with introducing the international baccalaureate program at my school and saw no overwhelming need to prepare for the national matura. Preparing the baccalaureate in 1992, however, made me aware of the demanding work that the matura would require. I realized it would be virtually impossible to introduce the matura by 1995 if the process did not begin. There were no exam catalogues. No examination center existed. Teachers had not even begun preparing themselves to prepare their students for the matura. But still, I stood aside and waited. I followed the matura developments in the newspapers and waited, incredulous, for someone to begin taking action. In January 1992, the Ministry of Education appointed the National Matura Commission to prepare the exam and the process of administering it. Time was merciless.

The matura made its way into my life in June 1993. Based upon my experience with the international baccalaureate program, I wrote a newspaper article criticizing the sad state of preparations for the matura exam. Soon, the minister for education, Slavko Gaber, suggested I become the director of the National Education Institute, the main institution responsible for the development of education in Slovenia. I assumed it was my practical experience with the international baccalaureate program that made him think of me. I accepted before the institute's former director, my friend Srečko Zakrajšek, explained to me that Gaber might have been looking to set up a scapegoat in case the matura failed. It was too late. I also became a member of the National Matura Commission, together with representatives from both Slovenian universities (Maribor and Ljubljana), a representative of the Slovenian Academy of Arts and Sciences, school principals, ministry staff, and other education experts. The extraordinary time pressure forced us to focus on deciding the rules, guidelines, and procedures that would make or break the matura. In September 1993, we sent off examination catalogues for thirty-one subjects to 115 schools. These catalogues prescribed the examination subject material, the way the exams would be taken, the duration of exams, and other aspects of the process.

Reaction was quick in coming.

Rebels With a Cause

In October 1993, I answered an invitation from Slovenia's association of high school students to attend a meeting on the matura. All of the people most responsible for the matura would be attending. I knew it would not be a friendly chat with promising young minds. Teachers and other educators knew preparations for the exam were lagging and doubted the matura would be carried out by 1995. The atmosphere in the meeting room was electric and the students were loud and impatient. They focused attention on deficiencies in the project. They pointed out that their teachers had failed to introduce subject matter the exam would cover. They complained that there was a shortage of literature on the Slovenian language. They griped that their teachers were unfamiliar with the examination criteria, that the paths to university were not clearly blazed, that there was a critical lack of time . . . I feared a strike.

"Preparations for the matura started much too late," said Žiga Škorjanc, a student leader in 1993. "Students were poorly informed and cooperation with those preparing the matura was unsatisfactory. Some university faculties, including the most prestigious one, the medical faculty, were clearly not in favor of the matura replacing entrance examinations. The students' discontent was growing. The question hung in the air as to whether there would be a matura at all in 1995."

Students from Ljubljana and the seacoast favored another strike.

During the course of their tirades, we managed to assure the students that their teachers would make up for the missing subject matter, the books would be provided, questions concerning university entrance exams would be resolved, and a complaint procedure would be instituted. After the meeting, Žiga started attending sessions of the National Matura Commission so the students would be able to follow the process and present to the commission their own proposals.

Microscopes, Books, and Money

One early October morning, I got a phone call from an upset high school principal. How, he asked, could he conduct laboratory work for the matura without adequate equipment? "This is what you prescribed in the catalogues," he said. I recognized that in our headlong rush to include lab

work in the matura, we had simply forgotten that the schools were under-equipped.

Consultations with other principals confirmed my fears. The schools lacked equipment and books in world and Slovene literature and other subjects that formed part of the matura exam. Without all of this, there would be no matura. How much time were we talking about? A year? Two years?

As usual in conversations with the minister for education, we wasted no time. I explained to him the seriousness of the situation. I told him these were not empty excuses by school principals trying to avoid the matura exam. He looked me in the eye and asked, "How much money do you need?"

I told him it would be about a million dollars. He picked up the phone, called the ministry's treasurer, and told her to provide the funding. Our conversation was over.

I wondered, would it be possible to acquire the equipment in the five months we had to get the students ready? If the schools were not equipped in time, clearly I could have said good-bye to my job as director of the Education Institute.

At the institute, we found an outsider to run the equipment project and gave each school a predetermined amount of funding based on the number of students. The schools would then have to order what they needed from the list of equipment prescribed by the exam catalogues. If a school already had some equipment, it would order whatever else it really needed. The bureaucrats responsible for procuring equipment at the institute did not like this method, complaining that schools that already had the equipment would get funds. My reply was clear. "This is exactly what I want." Too often, as a principal, I had found funding for equipment on my own through various external donors only to find out later that my school had been left out of the Education Institute's equipment acquisition procedures with the justification that my school already had the equipment and did not need the funds allocated by the Ministry of Education or the Education Institute.

After we had set the funding mechanism in place, things moved quickly. Committees for the natural sciences and world literature prepared lists of equipment and books; the lists were sent to the schools together with the amount of funds allocated to each of them. The schools understood they would get the equipment regardless of their current situation and returned the completed order forms.

The suppliers acted fast, because the money had been provided, and the payment terms were favorable. In March and April 1994, the equipment and books were delivered to the schools.

I was pleased to find library shelves heavy with books that would never have been there if not for the matura.

Teacher Training

Teacher training was another matter. We discovered that there was no program for the teachers.

Luckily, the introduction of the international baccalaureate program had given me experience in preparing teachers. We prepared a seminar plan covering two years. In the 1993–94 school year, the fall seminars presented the matura exam catalogue and the exam catalogues in individual subjects, the preparation and testing of exam tasks, and the preparation of students for the external examination. The spring seminars focused on the acquisition of knowledge in the specific areas of individual matura subjects.

Before the seminars could begin, we had to resolve whether or not to make them compulsory. I advocated making them voluntary. If teachers participated in the seminars voluntarily, they would regard the matura as a challenge and accept ownership of the project. In the end, my proposal was accepted. I eagerly awaited applications for the first seminars, which seemed like some sort of informal referendum on the acceptance of the matura among teachers. The teachers' response was enormous, even though the seminars were held on Saturdays and Sundays. We even had to repeat some seminars because the demand was so great. We held 243 seminars during the 1993–94 and 1994–95 school years; 2,793 teachers participated. There was hardly a teacher included in the 1995 matura who had not participated in at least at one seminar.

Media

Public acceptance of the matura also depended upon the media. But none of the members of the matura commission had any real experience working with the media. Only the Ministry of Education had a public relations person, and even he lacked experience. When I came from the Second

General High School in Maribor to work at the Education Institute, I soon learned the harsh reality of my new position with the media. Journalists no longer saw me as a lowly school principal but as a representative of the authorities who were pushing the matura. I also learned the concept of “off the record.” Luckily, I made no major gaffes.

As the matura became a focus of public attention, the leaders of the institutions responsible for the matura—the minister of education, his deputy, the president of the National Matura Commission, the director of the National Education Institute, the director of the National Examination Commission—took lead roles with the media in presenting the matura project.

We held news conferences for key events, such as the publication of the examination catalogues, the trial matura in 1994, the beginning stages of the matura, the course of the matura, the conclusive stage of the matura, and the publication of results. All the conferences were widely attended; the journalists appreciated obtaining integrated information from a single source.

This level of cooperation with the media continued after the matura was first carried out. We all knew there was no room for mistakes and were well aware—and still are—of how deeply the matura intervenes in the lives of young people and critically influences their future.

Trial Run

In June 1994, 960 students in twenty-six Slovenian high schools took a trial matura exam. Without this test of the test, we would have learned too late that if the thresholds for a passing score were set too rigidly in individual subjects, too many pupils would fail. This could have had catastrophic consequences. The history portion of the trial matura produced very low results; and for history, it would have been impossible to lower the threshold for a passing grade without making the criteria ridiculously low. Gaber called late one evening and told me about the problem. I recalled that the international matura exam allowed a conditional passing grade, something called a “nearly pass,” which allows a student to compensate for a negative grade in one subject with a good grade in another. Gaber reacted quickly with a decision to introduce the “nearly pass” into the trial matura exam. Another trial matura in January 1995 showed that the math problems were too difficult.

1995, The Grand Test

The matura began on a sunny June morning with the Slovenian language section. I spent the day at my old high school in Maribor. I was always excited by my visits to the school, feeling nostalgic for the days I had spent there. This time, however, I also had a strong sense of responsibility. My job was to monitor the matura and gather reactions.

The students did not appear to be nervous. This surprised me. But when I entered the teachers' room, my former colleagues barely had time to say hello. The air was filled with a sense of expectation. The matura was a big change for them. The sealed examination sheets were to be opened only in front of the students. There were codes to handle. The Slovenian language teachers were not present; according to the rules, the teachers of other subjects would administer the Slovenian component.

In the classroom that I visited with two supervisors, I was assured that everything would proceed well. The teachers and students knew the examination procedure in advance. Identification cards were in their places. Tables were suitably distanced from one another. The coding of the exam sheets did not present any problems. Such apparently insignificant things can throw the process off track for many people. Once the examination finally started, the students set down to work. Everything went without a problem, except for the problems some students had answering questions. At the end, I could feel the sense of relief around me.

One after another, until the last day of June, the examinations went forward. On the last day came the chemistry test. One of the students who took it was Božo Frajman, who, nine years later, was a twenty-eight-year-old Ph.D. candidate in biology. He remembered how feverishly some teachers had prepared students for the matura, as if it also was a test of their effectiveness. Božo said the Slovenian language section disappointed him, because themes available for his essay differed from those he had expected. Božo's oral exams took place at his own school, in front of his own teachers; this arrangement, he felt, was more stressful than the written exams, because he was aware that a teacher who knew him could influence the exam results more than an anonymous grader of the written exam.

Results

A total of 7,547 Slovenian students took the matura exam in June 1995. After the exam everybody waited for July when the results were to be announced. For me and other members of the National Matura Commission, waiting for the results in individual subjects was filled with suspense. None of us could guarantee that the tests would be wholly suitable or that teachers had fully understood the requirements of the exam catalogues and appropriately prepared their students.

The commission had built flexibility into the evaluation system, however, by creating a rule that an absolute criterion for a positive grade—namely, 50 percent—would not be applied and that we could, at our discretion, lower the threshold for a positive grade in individual subjects. The cut-off point for a passing grade and, accordingly, for the remaining grades would only be set on the basis of the results of individual exams. We thereby sought to prevent any fiasco that could have occurred if too many students had been unsuccessful—and effectively blameless—because the test was too difficult. Still we faced a possibility that too many students might fail even if the limit for a positive grade was extremely low, for example, 30 percent. How could we have explained this to the students, parents, and wider public? Although commission members believed in the expertise of our exam commissions, our fears remained. The results for the first subjects, however, brought relief.

The commissions had acted carefully in setting the minimum requirements, allowing the students' knowledge to fall within the established parameters, which did not bottom out at 50 percent in all subjects. When all the results were compiled, it became clear that we had avoided the fiasco predicted by some skeptics.

July 28 saw the announcement of results. The front pages of newspapers and popular TV shows were full of the hugs, tears, and laughter of the first Slovenian high school graduates. I felt for the joyful graduates celebrating their test results. Across Slovenia, 6,426 students, 85.1 percent of those who took the matura, passed. The number of failing students was no greater than the number in past final examinations administered and graded within the schools, rather than from outside by a National Matura Commission. The number of "golden graduates," students who achieved 30 or more points out of a possible 34, was high, 128.

Two years of preparation had ended. The matura was a reality. And it was a success. Ultimately, this was also my first matura, and it had a deep impact on my life. Soon after, riding the ferry to the island of Hvar in Croatia, my holiday destination, I watched the evening port lights twinkling and vanishing in the distance and, together with the most recent high school graduates, I had just one thought in my mind: thank God, the matura is over!

Postmortem: The Matura's Effect on the Classroom

A former student of mine, a young journalist named Borut Mekina, is very critical of the matura. In his opinion, the matura, with its rigid organization and hair-splitting exam instructions, especially for writing essays, is killing the creativity of students, making them like machines studying only what is required for the test. In the process, the broadness of knowledge is lost, while diligence and rote learning become the decisive factors. Some students could not stand this change; one of his friends left school half a year before the matura and is today a taxi driver.

After the first matura, I visited a high school where a group of teachers awaited me with their complaints. The matura exam was the ruin of Slovenian education, they complained. The conduct of classes and studies were increasingly being subjected to the requirements of the matura. Teachers were losing their autonomy and creativity, and the education component was losing its importance. Of course, I “gave as good as I got” by asking them to recall our discussions with the students who had claimed that, before the matura, teachers had never included the complete contents of a subject in their classes and that the quality of written assignments was not even worth mentioning. This conversation proved to me that the matura and school classes were highly interconnected, like two inseparable twins.

After the initial agitation and raised voices, we began to communicate in calmer tones. At least we agreed with each other on one thing: serious research should be carried out to provide answers as to whether classes were really becoming mere preparations for the matura exam.

There were similar criticisms and pressures in the general public. Research initiated by the National Matura Commission and begun by the National Education Institute in 1997 produced a number of answers.

I chose Zora Rutar-Ilc, a young critic of external examinations, to carry out the three-year research project. The most significant finding, a result of classroom observation, confirmed claims that only a minimal amount of classroom activity involved acquiring the highest levels of knowledge, skills like critical judgment, while almost one-half of classroom activity involved acquiring lower levels of knowledge, like the consolidation of definitions and explanations. Rutar-Ilc's research could not reveal what classes would have been like if there were no matura exam, because no similar research had been undertaken before the matura was introduced.

Regarding the connection between the matura and activities in the classroom, Rutar-Ilc found a number of positives. The general level of required knowledge and the quality of the knowledge increased; so did the regulation and grading of the examination. Teachers and students have oriented themselves to the required knowledge, and teachers have also learned how to ask more precise questions in class. The matura contributed to a more efficient consolidation of knowledge.

The results of the research also discovered several negatives. The mechanical consolidation of knowledge took place at the expense of autonomous thinking. There was less use of knowledge in problem-solving situations, less critical thinking, and less use of *know-how*.

The research also showed that the matura exam acted as a kind of leveling instrument: it supported the progress of "weaker" students and teachers but could impede the "stronger" students and teachers in their creativity and critical thinking. This is all the more understandable as the matura exam is also a selection mechanism, allowing the demand for objectivity "to outweigh" other more complex success criteria.

The debates on the matura and its influence on classes continue today.

The Reflection

On May 29, 2004, I am on my way to my school again as a headmaster for the beginning of the tenth external matura exam. The atmosphere at the school is completely different from the excitement of the first matura. It has become routine for the teachers.

After giving the teachers instructions they already know by heart, I go to the school lobby to be among the students. Except for a worried look here and there, they do not seem too anxious either.

At nine o'clock the matura starts and the school is in profound peace. Like earlier classes of students, the matura graduates this year will pass a test deeply rooted in the Slovenian tradition. The external matura, however, is different from the maturas of other generations, because the results now decide a student's registration at the university. This year I feel this fact most strongly because my son is taking the matura exam. I keep two things in my mind: his pronounced gift for journalism, which he has proved with numerous articles, and the required number of credits for admission to the university. Only now I am fully aware that the matura is only half the answer. A different system would require different admissions criteria at faculties, similar to admission procedures at Anglo-Saxon universities where the student's activities and an interview are considered alongside exam results. The outmoded Slovenian faculties do not do this, because they find that the existing procedure is simpler and requires less work. Consequently, the weight of the matura is great and a target of numerous, sometimes unjustified, criticisms.

While doing my everyday work, I wait in my office for the first exam day to pass. In my mind I look back over ten years of the matura in which I participated in two roles: as a co-creator and a performer. It is a rare opportunity to be the author of the idea and to be able to try it out in practice. In spite of all the criticism and some deficiencies, the matura has played a positive part in the schools: it has established equal standards and requirements for all Slovenian high school students. Naturally however, it could not solve the basic problem: the inadequacy of high school programs in general, including too comprehensive curricula. This is not the matura's task.

Teachers bringing back the exam papers and handing them in according to the prescribed procedure wake me from my thoughts. I go to the school lobby looking for my son. When I meet him I am relieved to see that he seems quite satisfied. But now we must await the results. This is my third role in experiencing the matura—the parental role. If I don't like the results, my response to the matura will be different from that of most parents' because I will only be able to criticize myself as a collaborator in its establishment.

Shadows of the War: A Teacher in Serbia

By Vigor Majić, Serbia

I met Ivan for the first time in the mid-1980s. A dynamic teacher of physics, he was a great improviser, combining different devices, used and discarded, parts of old machines, various pieces of plastic, cardboard, and metal, to make a workable tool, which he skillfully managed to turn into an interesting teaching aid, much better, more accurate, and demonstrable than factory models. Ivan came to Petnica for the first time to put into working order what looked like a huge pile of iron and screws, obtained as a gift from a major truck factory. They wouldn't have given anything away if they believed for a moment that it could work again.

The mid-1980s were, according to many, a golden era. A few economists and politicians disagreed, but most of that minority kept their thoughts hidden from the public. We all soon discovered that the country had lived on loans, that the accord and the harmony propagated by the leading politicians was only an imperfect mask for problems and disagreements that would lead to the most tragic events in recent European history.

The salaries were good, the Yugoslav passport opened all borders, families traveled abroad, even teenagers were able to afford short vacations in Italy and Greece and to travel across Central and Western Europe by train or hitchhiking. Unemployment was low, promises sweet and attractive, the future stable and foreseeable.

Ivan worked in a technical school in Palanka, a typical town in Šumadija, the central part of Serbia, with some thirty thousand inhabitants. The town relied on a strong local metal industry that produced good machines and sold them on all continents. The schools in this part of Europe have never been rich, but with a little patience and persuasion, a teacher could get everything he deemed necessary for his work. Schools were built even in the smallest villages; textbooks were good and cheap; parents did not protest much but children did, as was proper.

Ivan was the father of two small children. His wife also worked in the school. Two teacher salaries ensured a good living standard, a well-furnished apartment, a car, and regular summer holidays somewhere on the warm and sunny Adriatic Sea.

"It's no good," he would snort, but it meant that he was content. As a typical man from Šumadija, he knew how to say truthfully what he did not mean and to mean what he was not saying. In other parts of the country, people were made from a different mold, but speech and thought nevertheless rarely came together.

"Just let me make a lot of black coffee tonight and leave me in the lab, and I will think of something," he used to say, eyeing the pile of used sheet metal and remnants of sensitive instruments. The whole day he was lining everything up and getting ready to work. Whatever it was would function in the morning, even though it often happened that what became workable was some other thing he set his mind on at four in the morning.

When I asked him why his "engineer's bent" did not lead him to seek a job in industry where, after all, the salaries were higher, instead of working in a school, he just snorted and smiled broadly.

"C'mon, what industry? There's nothing interesting there. Here you have children all the time, fresh minds, uncorrupted, inquisitive. That's a challenge. You teach them something meaningful and then you watch them grow and make something of themselves."

He was endlessly patient with children. He laughed even when he was cross. He made them repeat the experiment until they succeeded.

"When they are successful, it is worth more than a whole lot of lessons learned by heart."

Ivan gladly participated in seminars and summer camps organized in Petnica. The summer camps attracted children who wanted more than the school had to offer, more new and up-to-date knowledge, more of an opportunity to discuss and to freely communicate with good teachers without the fear of being graded and subjected to their authority. Ready to work hard, even deep into the night, they came from all parts of the former Yugoslavia. Despite speaking different languages, they made friendships quite easily and attended demanding classes without any difficulty. The state supported such programs even though they were not part of the national education system. State funds were decentralized. Decisions were made by elected committees of experienced people, rather than by party members. Most of them thought of Petnica and several similar ini-

tatives as fresh and useful; they were content with establishing unrestrained ties and communication with developed countries.

Ivan often participated in the physics program, in practical courses such as measuring. He would make use of the simplest possible devices so that the pupils could fully concentrate on the process of measuring.

“Measuring is the essence of science. By measuring you learn that there are certain dimensions, which are what they are, real and hardly alterable. It does not depend on your mood or on what somebody else tells you or tries to persuade you. However, in any measuring there is an error, some limit of accuracy and precision. Nothing is absolute, you cannot get a perfectly accurate measure. You have to take into account the error of the measuring instrument as well as your own imprecision and imperfection. When you learn to respect the error and to keep it under your control, then you will be able to think and estimate other things and values. There can be no social engagement or right thinking about most sensitive issues and politics without a tool that enables you to be precise and objective and to differentiate between what is fact and what is fiction.

He used to say that he adhered to this doctrine in his relationship with pupils in school. He did not allow them to demand “self-management.” He probably exaggerated, but the idea seemed very interesting to me. Self-management, which empowered employees to make decisions even about expert issues for which they had neither knowledge nor experience, was in crisis in those years. The inefficiency of the system was slowly becoming visible. Unfortunately, the feeling of superiority in people who were able to decide about everything without the least capability to do so was deeply rooted. It would be felt decades later as a huge obstacle to modern, functional organizations in all areas.

At that time, Ivan began to be involved in public activities in his town. He was an active member of the Communist Party. When new democratically and pluralistically oriented political parties (at least in their titles) began to sprout, he did not want to switch his party affiliation. In Palanka, the ruling Communist Party managing structure was willing to accept a young and successful teacher, someone agile and resourceful like Ivan. However, school remained his main occupation and he could be found there at all times during the day. In keeping with the spirit of the times, he was an optimist.

It was 1992. The day was shrouded in the humid grey haze of late autumn. We were trying to discover the secret of Serbian *rakija*, a good homemade brandy, which Ivan himself produced, or at least boasted of having made. Palanka was quiet and dreary. Streets were empty, shops even emptier. Yugoslavia was breaking up, the war raged in Croatia and Bosnia, and the times were hard in Serbia. All sorts of things, from food to gasoline, were in short supply, while the prices skyrocketed. Moments of rare optimism abandoned us when lines of twenty- and thirty-year-olds with their packed luggage hurriedly queued at border crossings, pushing each other, in order to run away from poverty, war-time recruitment, and shortages. The state media tried in vain to spread the optimism and determination ordered by the political leadership, making up stories about successful companies and happy people.

"Times will change for the better," Ivan said, trying to sound optimistic. He obviously did not believe his own words, but I could discern an intention to steer the conversation toward school and his experiments and unusual teaching tools and further away from the blunt hopelessness of November grayness.

"We have turned into a province," he admitted unwillingly. "When I started to work, Palanka was near Belgrade, but now it seems very far away. In school everybody sulks as if nothing is their concern. A lot of work is needed, you have to work with children now more than ever. See what I invented. . . ." He kept on, explaining in detail some new idea. His smile was back and now it became quite clear that it was difficult to make him talk about what was happening around him. I myself often was not in the mood to talk about it either.

So we went back to school topics. We concluded that the state administration had forgotten about the schools and the need to preserve them. Ivan did not like to criticize authorities, especially state-level authorities. Not because he was afraid. Actually, he liked very much to tease the local government. It was sweet somehow.

"I gossip about my own people, the ones I know and with whom I grew up. There is no point in talking about the ones I don't know. No matter what is being done up there, it is the ones here in Palanka who, if they are smart, can make things better and life easier right here." He was trying to be convincing, but failed. Still, I found out that he did not change his party membership as many others had done. He remained "left-wing," sure that things would change for the better, that he himself could make some small contribution.

He told me in secret that he was planning to leave the vocational school and to move to the local gymnasium, the science-oriented secondary school.

“The gymnasium is a real challenge. We recently celebrated seventy years of its existence. The school was founded by craftsmen and merchants from Palanka immediately after World War I, at a time of immense poverty and difficulty. They built a big school, bigger than the bank, the court, and the municipality. These were half-literate people who felt that the school was the best investment they could make for the future of their area, for their children and grandchildren. It was not the state that built the school. If people now thought the way the old ones did . . .”

Later that afternoon, when darkness began to fall, turning small floating drops of false rain into a disagreeably cold drizzle, I set off back to Valjevo. The road, which until recently had been good, was now full of dangerous holes and cracks wider than the wheels. During the trip, I talked with a colleague about the sanctions imposed on Yugoslavia, the isolation closing in from all sides. The borders were difficult to cross; many friends from earlier times suddenly stopped communicating, even the exchange of letters and messages. The sanctions assumed weird proportions. Thus, for instance, several popular magazines to which we were properly subscribed ceased coming. The publishers decided to be greater patriots than the government and to punish schools and universities by banning information. The subscription they failed to deliver they, naturally, failed to reimburse. Actually our conversation was not a real conversation. It was rather a mental tonic meant to distract our attention and deceive us into believing that everything would be back in order in the next couple of months. We deluded ourselves for a couple of hours. No doubt, distances in Serbia increased significantly. A year ago, we needed less than two hours from Valjevo to Palanka, and now we spent no less than four. Einstein was right, even though he was not aware of such simple evidence. He was born, raised, and worked in different times, different places.

With the usual talk about the rainy spring weather and gossip about the behavior of educational authorities, we slowly drank strong black coffee, wrapped in a cloud of smoke from low-quality smuggled cigarettes. Ivan, now the principal of a renowned high school in Palanka, seemed to question the reasons for the sudden visit of his colleague from Petnica.

"C'mon, did you come here because of the weather and the concern about the educational authorities?" His question was direct.

"No, look, we are involved in an interesting project to introduce computers in certain schools in Serbia and to enable Internet access."

"So! That's nice. And you remembered me and this school where classrooms are so empty. A computer or two would be more than welcome here." He laughed slyly, sipped some coffee, and suddenly looked me in the eyes. "And this matter, I assume, is complicated, behind the ministry's back and risky." Again the strange laugh.

"The grantgiver will be someone not popular with the authorities," I admitted unwillingly in a low voice.

"And about how many computers are we discussing?" Ivan the principal puffed on his cigarette and calculated.

"A dozen maybe. . ."

"Deliver them and don't worry about us." He rubbed his hands, turning to a low cupboard beneath the table from where the smell of a ten-year-old homemade brandy was coming.

"The Soros Fund." I slowly uttered the crucial words, my head bent, and my eyes intensely focusing on my host, expecting his face would contort and that he would quickly change the subject.

"You don't look a gift horse in the mouth." That's all he said and smiled.

The codes were exchanged. The action could begin.

Ivan had become the school principal. He had also published two textbooks that were widely used all over the country. And he had advanced politically and was a member of the top municipal committee of the ruling Socialist Party. But the school was still his main interest.

In 1997, Serbia, already under UN sanctions for five years, was, practically speaking, isolated from the rest of the world. The living standard of an average family was hardly one-tenth of what it was in the early 1990s. The schools were getting money only for salaries. In many places, pupils themselves collected money to buy chalk or soap. Local authorities found money in their modest budgets to pay for electricity or minimal heating. The children sat in classrooms tucked into their thick pullovers. The teachers' strikes, which began slowly, were to engulf the entire country for the next year or two. In order to enable children to acquire some knowledge and finish school, these strikes in Serbia assumed a peculiar form: lessons were held every day, following the regular curricula, but each class lasted thirty minutes, rather than the usual forty-five. The

strikes stopped in early 2001. By that time, an entire secondary school class had finished school without ever experiencing the regular forty-five minute class. Further comments about the scope and quality of their education would be out of place.

The Fund for an Open Society worked with the Petnica Science Center for a couple of years on raising the quality of education and searching for new ideas to improve work in schools, such as the ambitious project to equip secondary schools with modern computer classrooms. The doors to most schools were firmly closed to Soros's foundation and locked with two keys. For years, Petnica fought a battle for survival and the salvation of its brilliant idea to fund bright and talented children in provincial schools and teach them contemporary science and humanities. Pioneering the introduction of computers in education as early as the 1980s, Petnica was a secret place to which hundreds of teachers more or less furtively came to learn something about computers, programming, and, more recently, the information miracle called the Internet. Three ministers of education in a row wanted to see Petnica closed and the Fund put away. However, Petnica's high reputation and the international protection of the Fund posed an obstacle for incapable clerks, who had been dragged from some God-forsaken dump of unusable human resources.

The Third Millennium project's goals were far-reaching and multifarious. By providing modern computers, it hoped to instill optimism in schools and among teachers and pupils, who were already showing signs of exhaustion in the fight for mere survival. It also hoped to "open the window" onto the world, with the Internet breaking the information blockade imposed by the regime-controlled state and local media, which was ideologically narrow-minded and used hate speech against all those who thought differently. The Internet, undoubtedly an undepletable resource of scientific, artistic, social, and technical information, would enable less-rich colleagues to compensate for the inaccessible magazines and expensive technical literature.

Within a few months, several hundred high-quality computers with accompanying software were installed in over forty schools. Despite frequent skepticism, the initiative provoked resistance almost nowhere, apart from one case. Not only teachers, but also regime-appointed school principals and even top local officials and local media accepted this initiative as God-sent. Sonja Licht, the Fund's president, clearly labeled a state enemy, was even presented with a ceremonial lunch in Palanka by Ivan—who by that

time had become a senior municipal official of the Socialist Party of Serbia—and was interviewed by reporters. Her statement and a tape of her handing over the computers were broadcast everywhere in Serbia. The education minister was red with anger, but his attempts to disrupt the campaign drew too many protests from local principals. Some of his more reasonable advisors suggested that such a move would be eagerly awaited by the opposition and negatively interpreted by hundreds of teachers and parents and children. Ivan, as can be assumed, encountered harsh criticism in his party, but it was short-lived.

The Third Millennium project launched dozens of local initiatives for equipping the schools and raising the quality of work in other areas. The school door began to slowly open for other projects by nongovernmental organizations. The projects were often backed by the Fund or some other international organization unpopular with the authorities. The Third Millennium inspired many other donors to focus on schools as a wise investment in development and a more promising future. Petnica initiated a broad program of teacher training in dozens of fields, which the ministry could not find a way to stop.

The school principal with whom this story begins, namely Ivan, has done a lot for his school before this happened, but especially afterward. Palanka did not become a more orderly community. Unemployment was on the rise. Incredible hyperinflation completely destroyed a once strong and now troubled, crippled, and isolated economy. The holes on the road became wider and deeper. The opposition, one of the democratic-right parties, was in power in Palanka, and Ivan was in opposition to the local authorities. However, in a small town where everyone knew each other very well, this political division was relative and did not at all reflect the situation at the state level. The city mayor and Ivan were friends even though political opponents. His circle of friends included people from third and fourth parties. More or less furtively, they socialized, mostly in suburban inns, respecting centuries-long Balkan tradition, often solving important local problems without regard to party positions.

“The police station is across from the school and my office directly faces theirs. As soon as I hear that police apprehended one of my students because he criticized the government or drank too much, I call the police chief for a brandy and I give him a piece of my mind. These are not some foreign kids and I know very well what he was like when he was their age. I am, for God’s sake, the school principal. I, and not those gendarmes, can question and punish the kids.

“It is the nature of their age to be rebellious. And they have good reasons to be so!”

Still, political divisions at the level of the state reflected on life in Palanka. Thicker and thicker curtains of political rifts dropped between former friends and even divided families.

The summer of 2000 was hot, dry, and unpredictable. The previous year was definitely one that Serbia wanted to skip, forget, and suppress in some lost corner of history. The escalation of the conflict in Kosovo led to the military intervention by NATO and the months-long bombing of towns and communications throughout Serbia. The state of war, which only older generations could remember, paralyzed all regular activities in the country. The schools stopped working, the traffic was interrupted, hundreds of thousands of people spent days and weeks in cellars and shelters. Political life stopped. Whoever openly criticized the authorities was risking his or her life. Still, the conflict ended after three months. The end of the war was marked by a symbolic solar eclipse, a unique natural phenomenon. The eclipse was instantly declared dangerous and hazardous by the state administration. The citizens were instructed not to look at the sky. A wise piece of advice.

In the summer of 2000, social tension reached its boiling point. It was expected that parliamentary elections scheduled for early autumn would bring a change of authorities. Fear of a bloody denouement could be felt in the air. That summer, somewhat surprisingly, Ivan appeared in Petnica in a cloud of dust from badly maintained roads and an explosion of frightened sparrows.

He brought a bottle of homemade brandy with him. In this part of the world, the home production of brandy is appreciated more than the ability to build a house, write a bestseller, or come up with an invention. Ivan knew this. As soon as an interlocutor would display signs of nervousness about Ivan's ideas on education, he would play the trump card, his brandy production, which gave him the status of a skillful and practical constructor, inventor, and master.

His intention was to assemble an unusual teaching tool from discarded parts of other devices. He was full of ideas. The same night, his nose stuck in a bucketful of steaming black coffee, he disappeared into a disorderly lab. He surfaced after a couple of days. He explained what he had

intended to do and what he actually did. As usual, he complained that good old classroom devices deteriorated in schools and that no one produced or imported new ones. He repeatedly tried to contact major European producers of teaching equipment and to convince them to come to Serbia, but it seemed that this blot on geographical maps was both too small and too dark.

At the time, Petnica was working on programs of teacher training. Among hundreds of colleagues from over two hundred schools, there were teachers from Palanka too. I asked Ivan about them. Even though his eyes sparkled, he did not want to talk about individuals, and instead talked about his school's faculty, which had been divided and apathetic for years.

"I put them in order. Now they mind their own business more. As soon as politicians begin to meddle, I raise the issue at a school board meeting and make them discuss the matter there, rather than stirring up and dividing people in the school and even involving children in their conflicts. I had fifty meetings of the school board in one year. I let them see that belonging to the school board is not merely an honorary post." Ivan boasted of his management of the school. I did not need convincing, because I knew that he had earned a reputation as a capable manager who succeeded in raising funds for equipment and the modernization of the school, even in those difficult times.

"I wring money out of everyone. That's my job. Everybody should invest in schools! When the state is out of money, local companies and rich individuals have to prove themselves. I keep telling them what their grandfathers were doing seventy years ago and what a great, huge school they built in this poor little town. If they don't give money, at least let them be ashamed."

Remembering the last year of war, Ivan was visibly happy that Palanka was more or less spared from bombing. Some bridges and roads near Palanka were attacked and destroyed, but the town itself remained intact. He did not hide his joy that Petnica seemed intact too, even though the nearby town of Valjevo was severely damaged.

"Thank God that my children are alive. One was in Belgrade the entire time and the other was with us. It wasn't easy to convince my wife that it was a good thing that we were not all in one place. You never know what may happen."

Petnica has been completely cut off from the state educational administration and state funding for a couple of years now. Still, Petnica easily

commanded the understanding of international organizations, primarily the Fund for an Open Society. Their assistance ensured the continuity of educational work and expansion of teacher training programs. Naturally, such assistance did not change the attitudes of the numerous local extremists. It was the fate of the majority of organizations, programs, and groups that bravely and openly communicated with the world. In some communities, conflicts would end with verbal assaults, but in others they would end with bombs and bullets in the night.

These days Ivan and I talked about many things. Beneath an optimistic exterior, he seemed worried. For the first time I noticed that he had more grey than black hair. He was not worried about the crisis, but about the duration of the crisis. Remembering the difficult years of the beginning of war and economic breakdown, I asked him what was the most difficult thing for him in the past years. I expected him to talk about low salaries and the departure of clever young experts or great teachers in search of better salaries.

"The greatest problem was heating," he said. "It is difficult to convince local bureaucrats that children have to be in warm classrooms." I was surprised. In Serbia, the state provides money for salaries in schools, but the local authorities cover all other costs incurred by schools. I thought his political position and good relations with the local authorities would ensure that such problems did not exist.

"You don't understand how people change when they get some official position. They turn into completely different persons. They somehow become ashamed of the logic and all those values they cherished their entire life. As if they had put on glasses through which they saw everything in other colors. And now I have to convince them that the school needs heating as soon as the weather turns cold rather than on a date previously established in some document. For three years, I have started from scratch each and every time. As if these were not their children," Ivan complained, noticeably worried.

Sensing his disquiet, I encouraged him, and tried to steer the conversation to more cheerful topics.

"Nevertheless, you are a successful principal," I said. "You reconstructed the school, you raised the quality of work, no one can dispute that."

He fell silent and smoked.

"Why are you sullen?" I asked. "You always enjoyed working with students. Even now as a principal you teach some classes and do not

work only in the administration. Your pupils respect you and the parents must respect you too.”

“No, it’s easy with pupils.” He sipped his coffee and frowned.

He definitely had some problems. I started to feel uncomfortable, because I did not know what caused them.

I did not find out what was bothering him until the end of his stay in Petnica. He did not want to talk about it or he cunningly avoided the topic even at moments of relaxation with thick black coffee and good home-made brandy.

The elections were due in two months, but that did not bother him much. He knew that his party was about to step down and he even considered that normal and what is more, necessary and useful.

“It is good to be in the opposition for a while. Many people in power relax and become too arrogant. For the last couple of years in Palanka the opposition has held power and still here I am, safe and sound, they did not put me in jail.” He said it as a joke, but he was also gravely serious.

Even though he supported the ruling party, I was fully convinced that Ivan was loyal not because of the privileges, but simply because he grew up as a sympathizer of leftist ideas. He sensed that a lot of new opposition parties were made up of people who changed their beliefs easily on the surface, preserving their old habits and methods of work. Loyal to the unpopular ruling regime, Ivan nevertheless remained open to fresh ideas and methods of work. This was an additional reason why I never thought of him as “a party stalwart,” but as an interesting and creative man ready to discuss anything and even to accept his opponent’s ideas.

He left one afternoon when summer showers fell profusely.

Ivan was replaced as the school principal a few days before the elections in order to buy the favor of the party leadership or some other reason. As usual in Serbia, the quality of work, experience, and results were not the decisive factor.

“My own people replaced me,” he said later with a strange smile that betrayed some unusual satisfaction and calm.

He remained at the gymnasium to teach his subject. His post as principal was occupied by a teacher about whom neither I nor any of my colleagues managed to form any opinion. No taste, no flavor, no smell, no shadow. . .

Soon, the principal was replaced again. Ivan was offered the post, and he had good local support, but he did not accept, giving his backing to a younger colleague who taught computer science.

“This is the future. He is young and able, he has more energy than I do. I am always available for my experience or advice, but he is by no means obliged to listen to me. Let him learn from his own experience.”

The fall of Milošević and the advent of the new democratic government did not stop the replacement of principals because of their politics and party membership. On the contrary, many capable people were removed in local political trading and replaced by people who were into politics rather than education. This was the fate of most principals who at the peak of Milošević’s power risked their careers and bravely opened the doors of their schools to ideas from outside, accepting the assistance of international organizations and partners. Someone said once that the revolution swallows its own children.

The new reform government, convinced of its hold on power, initiated a broad front of changes. However, the front was too wide for relatively weak and unhomogenized authorities. Many new projects were initiated too fast, without sufficient preparation, especially the preparation of those who had to carry out the reforms. The results in most areas could not be felt immediately, and the fight against corruption was not efficient, giving the opposition many arguments for criticism. The difficult economic situation undermined confidence in reforms and the “reform bloc” lost in the next parliamentary elections. The new government positioned itself as the center even though its right-wing orientation was glaringly obvious. One of its first moves was to stop the education reforms, which of course provoked great confusion in the schools.

Ivan’s party soon divided into two political parties. He remained true to his ideals and did not defect. Ivan continued to maintain friendships with people who used to be the opposition, then in power, and now something in-between. It didn’t bother him. He spent most of his time in a small house inherited from his father, not far from Palanka, which overlooked orchards and groves and clouds far along the horizon. The land he inherited he carefully and properly divided among his children. He planned to write another textbook. He still worked in the school, teaching physics and inventing new teaching tools with great enthusiasm. The new school principal respected him and supported this work.

Political changes in the spring and summer of 2004 did not affect him. He continued to complain frequently, sullen rather than gay. When education reforms started, he was rather skeptical even though he could not hide his curiosity about new ideas and the experiences of other countries.

However, when the process suddenly stopped, he became even more critical of such moves.

“School is not a child’s toy. The government has to behave responsibly and to have a clear vision that will be accepted by teachers, parents, and children. With such sudden changes, people will stop believing in the possibility and the meaning of any change. It’s no good.”

Serbia, like all the states of the former Yugoslavia, experienced many heralded but unsuccessful reforms of secondary school education in the 1980s. The teachers remembered it very well and so had good reason to be skeptical of projects that were announced with much fanfare by the central administration and which contained the magical word “reform.”

Ivan comes to Petnica more often now. Apart from working with students, he holds seminars for teachers, telling them from his vast experience that even without much money something new can be made from old discarded instruments. His talks give younger colleagues hope; they begin to see that out of their own initiative and without financial investment a lot of things can be fixed and put to work. Anyhow, no one here asks him what his political convictions are and for whom he votes in elections. He claims that seeing children’s eyes wide open is a great therapy for melancholy. He has stopped counting grey hairs.

Closer to the Ground

By Terrice Bassler

I first came to the Balkan region in the early 1990s as an official from the World Bank, one of the international agencies intent on helping the countries of South East Europe to upgrade their school buildings and update what was taught inside the classrooms. There were many of us arriving in those days after the fall of the communist regimes. In 1993, I was a fledgling education project officer leading the World Bank's first work with schools in Romania and Albania from an office on H Street in Washington, D.C. At age thirty-five, I had been working up the ranks at the Bank for over ten years and had finished a master's degree with its financial support.

I jumped at the chance to move to the Bank's new regional office in Budapest. After some cajoling, my bosses were more or less convinced that I could do better work in Europe. I packed up my belongings and moved to Hungary. From Budapest, I was able to visit Albania and Romania more often and for shorter stays than would have been possible from Washington. I could phone my local contacts in countries without great time zone differences.

My colleagues and I spent a lot of time traveling with our laptops, meeting officials, and visiting schools. We wrote long, dry technical reports to raise issues, reconcile the reality we saw with the data we received, and map out plans for reform. One cynical host described us as outsiders who "borrow your watch to tell you the time." But when we departed for the airports after our visits, the advice left behind mattered. It was factored into education budgets, new laws, and the catch-all process known as capacity-building. After a year or two, the words in our reports were backed up with funds in the form of loans delivered to the government. We focused on moving resources and changing others. We didn't often stop to consider, let alone write down, how working in the region shaped and reshaped us.

Albania and Romania were not easy places to work. In the early 1990s, shortly after their political revolutions (we were supposed to call them transitions), the people of these countries were still suffering much dislocation and hardship. Electricity, water, heating, phones and public transport didn't always function at the same time. Schools were in bad shape. They had been left to deteriorate by the communist rulers who squandered resources elsewhere and by the citizenry, who for decades hadn't dared to stop their leaders. In Albania, around a third of school buildings had been looted, lost, or inhabited by squatters during the outbreaks of pent-up social rage that punctuated the "transition." Teachers and students knew mostly one way of teaching and learning, with a blackboard and a book. Schooling appeared far out of step with innovations in the wider world.

Social stress and suspicion in the countries ran high, a result of the former regimes' legacy of political informants and persecution. It was hard to do business amid the intrigue and shifting alliances. Who was really working with whom and why? In which smoke-filled café might one find this out? Many of my more senior—and often male—colleagues in the World Bank avoided visits of more than just a few days in the deep Balkans, preferring the comforts, cultural scenes, and cuisines of Prague, Warsaw and Budapest. I understood why.

A few months after my move to Budapest, I was on a short trip to Albania. I remember Tirana and waiting for a meeting in the lobby of the Dajti Hotel, a concrete-and-stucco fossil from the Mussolini era, where it still took a bribe or a connection to book a room. I ran into a man named Paskal Milo. I knew him through some Albanian contacts in the United States who had referred me to him on my first visit. He had offered me plenty of advice about what the World Bank's project for education should entail. Paskal was an academic from the old times and a new member of Albania's parliament. A few governments later, he became minister of foreign affairs. "You and George Soros should meet," Paskal said. "He's over there. And he's getting interested in schools."

My first conversation with Soros was no longer than three minutes. He saw at once the connections and possibilities for joint work with the World Bank on large-scale "overhaul" of schooling in Albania, as he then described it. He spoke about a construction project he was funding in Bosnia and how it was related. I couldn't see the connection, but I listened anyway. "I will have my guy in Sarajevo follow up with you," he said. I was intrigued and a little doubtful.

I had heard something about this eccentric rich man who had set up a foundation in Tirana. Its office was in the basement of the Pyramid, an over-sized architectural fantasy realized by Albania's late dictator, Enver Hoxha. The Pyramid sat in the center of Tirana like a 20th century imitation of the originals in Egypt, constructed in rain-streaked white concrete. As with similar monstrous monuments in Ceaușescu's Bucharest, I always wondered what buildings from the past had been demolished to make space for this one. Other nongovernmental organizations were based there too.

I had met for coffee on a few previous occasions with the small group of Soros foundation people in Tirana. To be honest, I had a hard time finding a common language with them. Where I was hard-nosed about development and the use of money, they seemed idealistic and naive in the ways and means of widespread social change and public investment. They spoke more about vague ideas and hidden interests than about the real-life programs and budgets I knew from my training. I couldn't see a way to work with them. To be fair, they must have had the same circum-spect view of me and large multilateral institutions. They probably wondered at the wisdom and motives of whoever had sent me with so much money into a place and culture about which I had so little prior understanding or experience.

A few weeks after meeting Soros, I received a call from Fred Cuny, a tall engineer from Texas renowned for his relief and development work in crisis spots around the world. He told me he was leading a project funded by George Soros to restore water supply to residents of Sarajevo. He used as much of the local talent as he could, and there was plenty in Bosnia, he said. Fred and his colleague, an ethnic Kosovar engineer from Bosnia, joined the World Bank project appraisal trip I was leading in Albania. It was the winter of 1994. They wanted to get a feel for the situation and talk cooperation. I was certain at least that they would get a feel for the cold in the decayed and damaged schools we would arrange for them to visit.

Their next move took my bureaucrat's breath away. After just a phone call or two with Soros in New York toward the end of the visit, Fred told the minister of education and me that Soros would spend tens of millions of dollars on a "mega-project" for school reconstruction and education improvement. The sums mentioned were so large that they eclipsed the US\$9 million credit and policy conditions I was negotiating with the government on behalf of the World Bank.

Fred said he had enjoyed working together with us and asked me to put the World Bank's ideas for the new initiative in writing. I decided to do this in a letter to him and hurried to prepare it before we all left Tirana. One evening, after the day's meetings around town, I called together our team of education specialists. I gave them an assignment—what would you do in Albania's schools if you had the money? It was an instant fantasizing exercise, like nothing any of us had ever done before for the World Bank.

We put our wish list in the letter. The list was long. The thinking was out of our usual boxes. We tacked on a paragraph signaling Cuny and Soros that with such a move, they would, of course, take over leadership of the international donors' dialogue with the government on education policy and public spending. They reconsidered. Soon the World Bank and the Albanian government were told that Soros had agreed to match the World Bank's low-interest credit with a grant of the same amount. Soros money would be spent on school rehabilitation, engaging local workers and community spirit. The World Bank would retain its influence as policy advisor. We were in partnership. European Union funds also joined Albania's reconstruction effort, in a program that included monies for fixing both schools and prisons. The Albania Education Development Project (AEDP) got off the ground later that year.

The connection with Soros and Cuny on education in Albania had gone well, it seemed. A few months later they asked me to visit Sarajevo to see what could be done with Soros funds to assist the schools there. It was still wartime. To accept the invitation as a World Bank official would have broken all taboos. Bosnia's status in intergovernmental institutions was complicated. As Bank staff, we were not authorized to work where the bullets were flying. My medical insurance was invalid in a war zone. In spite of all this common sense, the chance to make a difference in Bosnia was too much to resist. There was a conflict we had all been watching for months on CNN from just a few hundred kilometers away in Budapest. I took vacation, hopped a military plane, and found myself in Sarajevo as a Soros volunteer.

World Bank experience had trained me to arrive in a new capital city having done my homework on the national school statistics and conversant in the Bank's education policies on everything from textbooks to teachers' salaries. This was almost useless in wartime Sarajevo. I was forced to work by feel. There were no up-to-date briefing reports on education. We managed to visit a few schools on one side of the front

lines. Inside the classrooms, we listened to the teachers and pupils who had managed to get to the school that day. They told us how important it was that they had a place to go in the morning, that is, when it was safe enough to leave home. They spoke about why they needed to keep the school going. They gave us clear, practical ideas about what could improve the situation, or at least make it more like it was before the war.

I also had the customary first meeting with Bosnia's Ministry of Education. We gathered in their offices: a few cold, decrepit rooms. We were all supposed to pretend it was a ministry. It wasn't clear whether they really had any budget for their work. Military priorities and humanitarian aid came first. No one apologized about this—it was reality. The usual questions and diplomatic policy discussions I would have with governments on World Bank missions seemed very distant at that moment.

Bosnians guided me through those few days and many subsequent visits. Everyone had a story to tell. And they had the ragged nerves and bloodshot eyes to prove it was all as bad as they said. I remember a man in one of our meetings who threw a fit of anger, shouting and lunging at me with his weary friends looking on. The outburst seemed a necessary release of frustrations, what with the loss of his much-loved way of life in Sarajevo, a social and personal tragedy over which he had no control. In his mind, he must have contrasted his despair with my freedom to enter and leave his hell like a thrill-seeking tourist. This episode helped me realize that however imperfect our efforts and results—and they did turn out to be so—it was important to put human support, resources, and gut-level intuition behind the people who could still see a better way.

After the Bosnia trip, in 1994, Soros offered to let me work on education projects with his growing network of Open Society foundations and its European hub in Budapest. More than a few World Bank colleagues told me I was crazy to take a leave of absence for a year to go off and work with this maverick NGO and its leader. At times, I thought I might be. It would sidetrack my career. Who knew what to expect with Soros at the helm? Yet, there were other voices. A forty-something British education economist I respected, and who had supported my decision to volunteer in Bosnia, said, "You might regret it, or you might never come back. But if I were your age and in your shoes and had the chance to work that way, I would go for it." I listened to him. I moved from the Bank's office in Pest to Soros's Open Society Institute (OSI) on the Buda side of the Danube River.

Whatever far-flung assignments I found myself on with OSI that year and in the years to come, all routes led back to the Balkans. There always seemed to be a crisis, a rising tension, or a sharp political turn in the region. This volatility meant a hurry-up effort to start up something new or rethink what we had going in education. The Dayton Agreement on Bosnia in 1995 didn't bring the overnight peace and progress in schools that we had all hoped for. Still, there were enough people ready to work for change after the war. We collaborated on a strategy that relied on local vision, at a time when education policy and funding in Bosnia were mostly in the hands of foreigners with international agencies.

In some ways, the experience of postwar Bosnia seemed to occur anew half a decade later in Kosova, after the NATO air strikes to end the fighting there. I lived for a year with colleagues in Prishtina in 1999–2000. We worked hard to build on the Kosovars' legendary parallel education system, a ground-up, civil-society effort that kept schools alive during the years of oppression. We worked even harder to get the UN administration to listen to what Kosovars wanted and to involve them in creating their future. I wasn't sure if I was a local or an international worker. By this time, identity and loyalties had become more than a bit muddled.

Romania's education reform always seemed to be on the horizon. After my World Bank involvement there, I returned every year or so to have a look at how it was all going. Even with a large World Bank loan and many donors active, the reform often got stuck or encountered resistance and we saw the flaws in our original design. I joined meetings with colleagues there about what OSI might do to help the top-down change become more bottom-up. Soros even started another of the "mega-projects" to model and help the process along.

OSI work took me to new places in the Balkans as well. Macedonia seemed ever on the brink of ethnic instability and almost fell in a few times. Most vivid for me was the spring of 1999 when this tiny country bore the brunt of the Kosova refugee crisis. We organized as best we could to help local kids and Kosovar children somehow complete their broken school year. UNICEF set up classrooms in tents within refugee camps. In many parts of the country, though, local and refugee children were suddenly squeezed into the same classrooms. Dignity was important, even on simple matters. No one had made provision for the Kosovar refugee children to have mid-day snacks in school alongside those provided for their Macedonian classmates. The local NGO community saw

this and responded by delivering emergency snacks every day for weeks. Who else might have seen human rights and equity and acted on them in quite this way? Local NGOs also worked hard to make sure that Romani refugee children affected by the crisis received their rightful share of the aid that flowed into the country.

There were times during the 1990s when it seemed as though the Milošević regime in Serbia would never end. Children, teachers, and schools in both Serbia and Montenegro suffered under the sanctions. The creative “guerilla” work that was possible in those years with local civic alliances was a great eye-opener. There were subversive summer camps, expressive art programs, and the quiet exchange trips that enabled resisters and visionaries to get outside the country and trade stories, information, and words of hope. When real development wasn’t possible, this type of networking made sense. In outright defiance of Serbia, the pro-independence leaders in neighboring Montenegro set about creating an education system of their own toward the end of the decade.

The civil society effort in Serbia paid off later, when Milošević had settled into his cell in The Hague and went on trial before the United Nations war crimes tribunal. There was much work to be done for Serbia to catch up with other parts of the region. The post-Milošević Ministry of Education and its partner NGOs took off like a jet on one of the most ambitious education reforms in the region. During the darker years, they had been storing up knowledge and learning from neighbors’ mistakes.

The Soros education project in Albania had an eight-year lifetime as an NGO. During these years, it invested tens of millions of dollars into schools that are better, just as Soros himself had intended. The project gained many more funding partners, including the Albanian government, which matched Soros funds. AEDP reconstructed more than two hundred schools, re-inspired community participation in education throughout the country and trained Albanian educators for change in the classroom. The community spirit of the work somehow survived a setback in 1997 with the crash of the get-rich-quick “pyramid” schemes and the social chaos it brought to Albania.

On the downside, many of the young staff trained in Albania through the project used their new skills to leave the country for places like Boston, Toronto, and Chicago. We had seen them as the future of Albania. They set their sights on a better life abroad; their contribution to any social development in the country, beyond the remittances they send back home to family members, has probably been lost. It will take a generation

to replace this talent. Fred Cuny never lived to see the legacy of our first joint efforts. He was murdered in Chechnya in 1995 while organizing emergency humanitarian aid in Grozny, on behalf of Soros.

The landscape of expertise in the Balkans has changed in more promising ways, too. There are more and more experienced local specialists within the Balkan countries. A decade ago, these officials sat facing their international partners across the negotiating table. They took part in endless training seminars on how to restructure budgets, produce new textbooks, and modernize examinations. Nowadays, skilled education experts from the Balkans are just as often on the other side of the table in international agencies, bringing with them years of savvy on managing change, postcommunist style. To us outsiders, this new cadre both gratifies and humbles at the same time. With political change in the region still very frequent, local education specialists are in government leadership one day and out in the NGO or donor sector the next, like some perpetual revolving door. At least these shifts occur more often now through elections than through battles.

My early work with OSI in Albania and Bosnia spread into assignments that spanned from Central Europe to Central Asia and as far south as Cape Town. Thinking alongside local people with vision—and relying on their guidance—became routine. So did moving resources quickly, at least for a while. By the late 1990s, the Soros network had grown so large that some of its spontaneity was replaced by strategy papers, budget tables, and board meetings resembling those on which I had been brought up in Washington a decade before.

The whole basis of Soros's effort is still that any of us might be wrong at anytime. It's not simple. That built-in fallibility includes each of us education experts and any of the solutions we tote around in our briefcases or transmit via cyberspace. All the cross-checking of reports and proposals in a large multicultural network also means there is plenty of politicking as we propose and rethink to get it right. I can't say it is always fun or straightforward, though the experience of it all continues to be at least one lesson a day.

Country Context Data

This section provides basic data on education in each country and territory of the region (Kosova, Montenegro, and Serbia are treated individually, as their education systems function separately) to help readers understand the country contexts of the stories in the book. There is no ideal or comprehensive statistical source on education in South East Europe. This section draws upon the more reliable and current sources. The data are far from perfect, not always comparable across places or as up to date as would be useful. Given the importance of Romani education issues in the region and within this volume, a comparative table is included at the end to shed some light on the situation of Romani children and youth in South East Europe.

The data framework comprises the following indicators:*

Total population. Refers to the *de facto* population, which includes all people actually present in a given area at a given time.

Annual population growth rate (%). Refers to the average annual exponential growth rate for the period indicated.

GDP (gross domestic product). The sum of value added by all resident producers in the economy plus any product taxes (less subsidies) not included in the valuation of output.

PPP (purchasing power parity). A rate of exchange that accounts for price differences across countries, allowing international comparisons of real output and incomes. At the PPP US\$ rate, PPP US\$1 has the same purchasing power in the domestic economy as \$1 has in the United States.

Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP. Current and capital expenditures on education by local, regional, and national governments, including municipalities (household contributions are excluded), expressed as a percentage of the gross domestic product.

* Definitions of the indicators are from the UNDP Human Development Report, except for the definition of “education levels.”

Compulsory education: age-range. Mandated by constitutional or legislative law. These laws require that children within a certain age range be enrolled in school, even though these laws may not always be strictly enforced. Duration of compulsory schooling is expressed in number of years of schooling and age of entrance.

Education levels.

- **Basic education** provides the student a sound basic education in reading, writing, and mathematics, along with an elementary understanding of other subjects such as history, geography, natural science, social science, art, and music. In some cases, religious instruction is included. This level consists of education provided for children, the customary or legal age of entrance being not younger than five years or older than seven years. This level covers in principle about nine years of full-time schooling, including both primary and lower secondary education (ISCED levels 1 and 2).
- **Upper secondary education** (ISCED level 3) is considered to be increasingly specialized and requires a more qualified teaching staff than lower secondary education. The entrance age to this level is typically fifteen or sixteen years. These programs typically require the completion of about nine years of full-time basic education for admission or a combination of education and other experience.
- **Tertiary education** (ISCED levels 5 and 6), also referred to as third-stage or third-level education, is the educational level following the completion of a school providing a secondary education such as a high school, secondary school, or gymnasium. Tertiary education is commonly higher education that prepares students for a quaternary education, but it can also be vocational education and training. Colleges and universities are examples of institutions that provide tertiary education. Tertiary education generally culminates in the receipt of a degree: vocational certification, associate's degrees, or bachelor's degrees (B.A. or B.S.).

Enrollments. Number of pupils or students officially enrolled in a given grade or level of education, regardless of age. Typically, these data are collected at the beginning of the school year.

N/A. Data not available.

Basic Data: Albania

1. Total population (millions), 2002: 3.1

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 1975–2002: 1.0

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2002: 4,830

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2003: 2.9

Source: Ministry of Education and Science

5. Compulsory education

theoretical entrance age: 6

duration (years): a) 8; b) 9

Note: The new requirement of nine years of compulsory education became effective as of 2004 by the decision of the Council of Ministers, July 2004.

Source: Ministry of Education and Science

6. Enrollments

	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	491,541	94	49
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	118,361	71	50.6
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	53,255	18.3	62.3

Source: Ministry of Education and Science

Basic Data: Bosnia and Herzegovina

1. Total population (millions), 2002: 4.1

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 1975–2002: 0.4

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2002: 5,970

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2004: 6.4

Source: Council of Ministers; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Economic Relations: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper

5. Compulsory education

theoretical entrance age: a) 7; b) 6

duration (years): a) 8; b) 9

Note: a) the former structure that is being phased out; b) the new structure that has been gradually introduced since the 2004/2005 school year.

Source: Framework Law on Primary and Secondary Education in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Official Gazette, No. 18/03)

6. Enrollments

2000/2001	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	367,000	98	48
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	172,000	72	49.5
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	67,000	24	51.6

Sources: Council of Ministers; Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Economic Relations: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper; Human Development Report, Bosnia and Herzegovina: Millennium Development Goals, UNDP Bosnia and Herzegovina, June 2003

Basic Data: Bulgaria

1. Total population (millions), 2002: 8.0

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 1975–2002: -0.3

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2002: 7,130

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2004: 4.1

Source: Public Expenditure Review: Education - Status, Problems and Perspectives, Ministry of Finance, Bulgaria, 2004

5. Compulsory education

theoretical entrance age: a) 7; b) 6

duration (years): a) 8; b) 9

Note: a) the former structure that is being phased out; b) the new structure that has been gradually introduced since the 2003/04 school year, including one compulsory year of preschool.

Source: Public Education Act (State Gazette, No. 86/ 1991, amended and supplemented in 1996, 1998, 1999, 2002, 2003, and 2004)

6. Enrollments

2003/2004	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	644,637	92.25	50.6
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	374,262	77.1	
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	261,270	N/A	52

Sources: National Statistical Institute; Education in the Republic of Bulgaria, National Statistical Institute, Sofia, 2004

Basic Data: Croatia

1. Total population (millions), 2002: 4.4

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 1975–2002: 0.1

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2002: 10,240

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 1999–2001: 4.2

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

5. Compulsory education

theoretical entrance age: 7

duration (years): 8

Source: Law on Elementary Education (Official Gazette, No. 69/2003)

6. Enrollments

2002/2003	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	395,709	N/A	N/A
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	196,147	N/A	N/A
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	116,434	N/A	N/A

Source: Central Bureau of Statistics

Basic Data: Kosova

1. Total population (millions): 1.9 (est.)

Source: Statistical Office of Kosovo 2004

2. Annual population growth rate (%): 1.6

Source: Statistical Office of Kosovo 2004

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2004: 2,660

Source: Human Development Report 2004

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2004:

4.98

Source: Kosovo Budget 2004

5. Compulsory education

theoretical entrance age: a) 7; b) 6

duration (years): a) 8; b) 9

Note: a) the former structure that is being phased out; b) the new structure that has been gradually introduced since the 2002/03 school year

Source: The Law on Primary and Secondary Education, UNMIK Regulation 2002/19, 31 October 2002

6. Enrollments

2002/2003	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	307,517	98	48
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	93,502	63	44
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	23,175	16	45

Source: Statistical Office of Kosovo 2004

Basic Data: Macedonia

1. Total population (millions), 2002: 2

Source: *UNDP Human Development Report 2004*

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 1975–2002: 0.7

Source: *UNDP Human Development Report 2004*

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2002: 6,470

Source: *UNDP Human Development Report 2004*

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 1999–2001: 4.1

Source: *UNDP Human Development Report 2004*

5. Compulsory education

theoretical entrance age: 7

duration (years): 8

Sources: *Law on Primary Education (Official Gazette, No. 29/2002)*; *Law for Changing and Amending the Law on Primary Education (Official Gazette, No. 40/2003 and 42/2003)*

6. Enrollments

2003/2004	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	231,868	N/A	48.4
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	95,842	N/A	47.7
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	46,637	N/A	57.0

Source: *State Statistical Office, Republic of Macedonia*

Basic Data: Moldova

1. Total population (millions), 2002: 4.3

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 1975–2002: 0.4

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2002: 1,470

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 1999–2001: 4.0

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

5. Compulsory education theoretical entrance age: 6 duration (years): 9

Source: Law of Education (Monitorul Oficial of the Republic of Moldova, 9 November 1995, No. 62-63)

6. Enrollments

2002/2003	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	520,760	85.8	49.1
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	104,176	38.8	51.7
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	110,246	20.5	56.8

Sources: Education in Moldova. Statistical Publication, 2002/2003. The Department for Statistics and Sociology of the Republic of Moldova

Basic Data: Montenegro

1. Total population (millions), 2003: 0.6

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Montenegro

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 2002: 4.4

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Montenegro

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2003: 5,969.85

Source: Institute for Strategic Studies and Prognoses, Montenegro

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2001: 4.1

Source: The first release of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Montenegro, November 2003

5. Compulsory education

theoretical entrance age: a) 7; b) 6

duration (years): a) 8; b) 9

Note: a) the former structure that is being phased out; b) the new structure that has been gradually introduced since the 2004/2005 school year

Source: Law on Primary Education (Official Gazette of Republic of Montenegro, No. 64/02)

6. Enrollments

2003/2004	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	73,653	N/A	50.12
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	32,215	N/A	N/A
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	10,644	N/A	N/A

Source: Ministry of Education

Basic Data: Romania

1. Total population (millions), 2002: 21.7

Source: National Institute of Statistics

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 1975–2002: -0.3

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2002: 6,560

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2004

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2002: 4.2

Source: Ministry of Finance

5. Compulsory education theoretical entrance age: 6 duration (years): 10

Source: Law for the Revision of Education Act No. 84/1995 (Official Gazette of Romania, No. 430/2003)

6. Enrollments

2000/2001	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	2,411,506	99.2	48.67
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	687,919	N/A	54.8
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	533,152	N/A	53.5

Source: National Institute of Statistics

Basic Data: Serbia

1. Total population (millions), 2002: 7.5

Source: Republic Statistical Office, Republic of Serbia

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 2001: -2.6

Source: Republic Statistical Office, Republic of Serbia

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2004: 2,200 (est.)*

*Note: A figure for Serbia as a distinct entity was not available. The estimate here pertains to Serbia, Montenegro, and Kosovo.

Source: CIA World Factbook 2004

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP: 3.4

Source: Ministry of Education and Science Report for UNESCO Conference, Geneva, September 2004

5. Compulsory education

theoretical entrance age: a) 7; b) 6

duration (years): a) 8; b) 9

Note: a) the current structure that will be phased out; b) the new structure that will be introduced gradually in the 2006/07 school year

Sources: Law on the Basic Elements of the Education System (Official Gazette, No. 62/03, 64/03), Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Law on the Basic Elements of the Education System (Official Gazette, No. 58/04)

6. Enrollments

2002/2003	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	667,570	97.96	48.67
Upper Secondary Education (ISCED 3)	302,612	76.83	50.55
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	197,322	32.1	55.70

Sources: Republic Statistical Office, Federal Statistical Office

Basic Data: Slovenia

1. Total population (millions), 2002: 2.0

Source: *UNDP Human Development Report 2004*

2. Annual population growth rate (%), 1975–2002: 0.5

Source: *UNDP Human Development Report 2004*

3. GDP per capita (PPP US\$), 2002: 18,540

Source: *UNDP Human Development Report 2004*

4. Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 2004: 6.08

Source: *Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, Republic of Slovenia*

5. Compulsory education

theoretical entrance age: a) 7; b) 6

duration (years): a) 8; b) 9

Note: a) the former structure that is being phased out; b) the new structure that has been gradually introduced since the 1999/2000 school year

Source: *Law on Elementary School (Official Gazette of Republic of Slovenia, No. 12/96, 33/97, 59/2001 and 71/04)*

6. Enrollments

2003/2004	Numbers of students enrolled	Enrolled as % of the age cohort	Females as % of the enrolled
Basic Education (ISCED 1 and 2)	177,535	N/A	48.6
Upper Secondary Education* (ISCED 3)	103,538	N/A	49.6
Tertiary Education (ISCED 5 and 6)	104,396	N/A	56.9

*Data refer to the 2002/2003 school year

Source: *Statistical Office of Republic of Slovenia*

Basic Data on Roma and Education in South East Europe

Country	Total population (millions)	Romani population (official)	Romani population (estimated)	Number of Romani children (estimated under 18) ¹	Romani children enrolled in primary education ²	Roma completed primary education	Romani children enrolled in or completed secondary education ³	Roma enrolled in or completed University
		(% of official total population)	(% - average estimated population / official total population)	(% - estimated Romani children under 18 / average estimated population)	(% - estimated enrollment / estimated eligible for enrollment; ages 7-18)	(% - Roma completed average estimated population)	(% - Roma completed or enrolled / average estimated population)	(% - Roma completing or enrolled / average estimated population)
Albania	3.1	1.300	90,000–100,000	50,000	12,000–29,000	unavailable ⁴	1,235	285
		0.04%	3.08%	53%	36%–87%	unavailable	1.3%	0.3%
Bosnia and Herzegovina	4.1	8,864	40,000–50,000	27,000	2,565	unavailable	585	450
		0.22%	1.10%	60%	14.2%	unavailable	1.3%	1%
Bulgaria	8.0	370,908	700,000–800,000	300,000	179,200	262,500	72,000	3,750
		4.63%	9.38%	40%	89.6%	35%	9.6%	0.5%
Croatia	4.4	9,463	30,000–40,000	17,500	1,500	unavailable	308	14
		0.22%	0.79%	50%	12.9%	unavailable	0.9%	0.04%
Kosova	1.9	unavailable	45,000	18,000	2,963–9,000	unavailable	168	10
			2.37%	40%	25%–75%	unavailable	0.37%	0.02%
Macedonia	2.0	53,879	135,000	43,200	7,900	unavailable	569	126
		2.69%	6.75%	32%	27.4%	unavailable	0.42%	0.09%
Moldova	4.3	11,600	20,000–25,000	7,000	1,798	unavailable	unavailable	unavailable
		0.27%	0.52%	32%	39%	unavailable	unavailable	unavailable
Montenegro	0.67	2,875	20,470	11,136	1,006	unavailable	460	60
		0.43%	3.04%	54%	13.6%	unavailable	2.3%	0.3%
Romania	22.4	535,140	1,800,000–2,000,000	740,000	88,742	537,500	107,500	17,200
		2.39%	8.5%	41%	18%	25%	5%	0.8%
Serbia	7.5	108,193	400,000–450,000	175,000	17,323	116,662	34,000	1,488
		1.44%	5.67%	40%	14.8%	27.45%	8%	0.35%
Slovenia	2.0	2,293	8,000–10,000	unavailable	1,547	unavailable	40	5
		0.12%	0.45%	unavailable	unavailable	unavailable	0.44%	0.055%

¹ The figures in this column vary from estimated population under the age of 18 to estimated number of Romani children of primary school age. The figures vary due to the availability of data. Estimates are calculated against the estimated Romani population.

² Primary (compulsory) education in most countries covers grades 1–8 /9, depending on the country.

³ Secondary education is considered postprimary, usually covering grades 9/10–12. Academic lycéums as well as technical schools are considered in this category.

⁴ Statistics on Romani children are difficult to find for a number of reasons, most commonly because not all Romani children identify themselves as Roma and because ethnicity is not routinely recorded.

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Chronologies and Milestones of Education Change in South East Europe 1990–2004

These chronologies are additional context for the stories in this volume. The timelines highlight pivotal policy shifts, investments, implementation of reforms, and many set-backs along the way. The actors and groups whose activities are cited include governments, the military, donors, nongovernmental organizations, other members of civil society, and the citizenry at large.

These original chronologies were compiled by staff of the national foundations of the Open Society Institute/Soros foundations network in South East Europe, in cooperation with their NGO partners. They are based on the knowledge and understanding of persons engaged with education reform over the last fifteen years. As such, the timelines have the advantage of an informed local perspective, as well as some natural bias that may accompany individuals' views on the history they have lived through.

Albania

1990

- Education system is highly centralized, with curricula permeated by communist dogma and ideology. Leading reformers voice the need to learn from international experience in education.

1992

- Communist dictatorship collapses. Albania is confronted with the pressing need for profound reforms. The ensuing social unrest results in extensive damage across the country to an already dilapidated school infrastructure.
- First multiparty elections held.
- Curricula cleansed of ideological subjects and military education.
- Efforts instituted to develop new sets of core subjects and textbooks free of ideology. Attempts made at introducing interactive methodologies of teaching and learning.
- A cascade system of teacher training put in place,¹ allowing for the intensive training of teachers to cope with the newly introduced curricula and methodology.

1994

- Law on higher education passed, marking a step forward in democratization of universities.
- Human rights introduced as a cross-curricular element in basic education.

¹ A trainer, a teacher with half of the weekly teaching load, had the responsibility to “assist, advise and train” nearly 70 teachers of a certain subject. These trainers were trained by a team of national trainers under the responsibility of the Institute of Pedagogical Research.

- Initial steps taken to create a National Center of Assessment and Examinations to administer graduation and university entrance examinations.

1995

- The World Bank, the European Union, and George Soros (through the Albania Education Development Project, or AEDP) commit a total of more than US\$30 million in support of school construction and rehabilitation and capacity-building for reform of teaching and learning.
- Law on pre-university education passed, laying the foundations for development of the education system to contribute to a democratic society and free market economy. The legislation also launches a new structure of vocational schools, and permits the operation of private (nonpublic) schools.
- Bylaws passed to introduce school boards with participation of stakeholders from the school and the community.

1997

- The get-rich-quick “pyramid” financial schemes that have become popular throughout the country collapse and precipitate a political and social crisis. In extensive and violent social unrest, schools are looted throughout the country. Remarkably, 89 schools constructed or repaired by AEDP with community participation suffer no damage. A weakened government makes major cuts to resources for education.
- A four-year joint program of the government and donors is launched to improve school infrastructure (school construction and school rehabilitation). The initiative eventually improves 55 percent of school buildings and benefits an estimated 60 percent of enrolled pupils and students.

1998

- The National Center for Evaluation and Assessment is established.
- National system of cascade teacher training is abolished. In-service teacher training entrusted to local authorities in decentralized structures.
- The school week is restructured from six days to five, entailing sudden interventions to curricula that result in an increase in students’ workload.

1999

- Hundreds of thousands of refugees from Kosova enter Albania during the Kosova conflict and are housed with families and in camps in various parts of the country.
- Law on higher education is passed, granting academic freedom and administrative and financial autonomy to universities and guaranteeing free election of university leadership.
- Pilot stage of reform is launched to specialize general secondary schools along two strands—science and social studies.

2000

- Law on local governments proclaims general education a shared function between local and central governments.

2001

- Albania Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper identifies education and health sectors as long-term priorities in the context of achieving Millennium Development Goals.

2002

- Albania Poverty Reduction Strategy evolves into the National Strategy for Social and Economic Development, outlining mid- to long-term government policies. Education is cited as a priority in the struggle for economic growth and poverty reduction. Education targets and goals up to the year 2015 are set in conjunction with Millennium Development Goals.
- Ministry of Education and Science is restructured to focus on building capacity in education policy and quality assurance functions. Its Policy and Planning Unit becomes central to the ministry's operations.
- A National Education Inspectorate is established.
- Newly established Minister's Advisory Council welcomes the participation of stakeholders in education reform.
- Ministry employees become subject to testing in accordance with the requirements of legislation on civil service, a measure undertaken to protect the ministry's technical staff from political purges and turnover with the frequent change of ministers.
- Law on Pre-University Education (1995) amended to grant local governments increased decision-making authority.
- Open, competitive bidding is introduced into school textbook provision through public procurement of the first grade alphabet book.
- George Soros closes the AEDP, completing the construction, education, and community involvement investments and efforts of more than six years.

2003

- Institute of Pedagogical Research is divided into the National Curricula and Standards Institute and the National Center for In-service Teacher Training.
- The national system of education directorates is consolidated from thirty-six entities at the district level to twelve entities at the regional level.
- Directors of education directorates are recruited competitively in an attempt to emphasize merit over political influence in hiring.
- Decree is passed to bring about more competitive, merit-based procedures in the appointment of school principals.
- A study, *Roma and Evgjits in Albania: From Social Exclusion to Social Inclusion, or The Gold Coin Dilemma*,² reveals that the average number of school years completed by Romani children in Albania is about 4.02 and by Evgjit children about 5.05, less than half the national average of school completion rates.

2004

- A National Education Strategy for pre-university education is approved in the government and sets priorities in the sector for government and donors.
- A government decree restructures levels and years of schooling, in an effort to bring the Albanian education system more in line with practices elsewhere in South East Europe and EU and OECD member countries.
- Ministry of Education and Science, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Decentralization and Local Government sign a memorandum to accelerate the pace of decentralization of pre-university education.

² By Hermine De Soto, Ilir Gedeshi, Sabine Beddies, and Daniel Perez.

- The Municipality of Tirana is designated as a pilot municipality to implement centrally allocated funds for school construction and rehabilitation.
- An alliance of civil society organizations, led by the Network of Education NGOs, lobbies the parliament and government to honor their commitments to education as expressed in the National Education Strategy, and the budgetary allocation for 2004 is subsequently increased by 15 percent.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

1992–1995

- War time. Education system is largely dysfunctional as a learning institution. Approximately 60 percent of school buildings are destroyed. Thousands of teachers flee the country. Time spent on learning is severely reduced or disrupted for an entire generation of children and youth. Schools that manage to keep functioning survive largely on ad-hoc individual, school, and community-based efforts and intermittent humanitarian aid.

1995

- The Dayton Peace Agreement, to end the war, introduces a new Bosnia and Herzegovina Constitution that divides the country into two entities and one district. In one entity, the new Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the education system is decentralized into ten units of government, called cantons. In the other, the Republika Srpska, education remains centralized at the entity level. The Brčko district also has a separate education system. Counting the overall national system, there are thirteen autonomous education ministries with limited cooperation among them.

1996–1998

- Physical reconstruction of schools begins and an estimated US\$172 million is invested. Presence of major international organizations, such as UNESCO, the World Bank, UNICEF, and others increases in the education sector.
- International organizations, in particular the Office of the High Representative, assume authority over many aspects of education.

1999

- International organizations pressure the thirteen education ministries to withdraw offensive and objectionable material from textbooks for literature, language, history, geography, and music.
- EU PHARE program supports the development of a vocational education and training reform aimed at creating a system that better reflects and responds to an emerging market economy and democratic society.

2000

- World Bank launches a three-year Education Development Project with Bosnia and Herzegovina's education authorities, supported by a Bank loan of US\$13 million. The project institutes and supports establishment of education standards and an assessment agency at the state level, a fund for school quality initiatives, an education management and information system, and some activities in higher education.

2001

- The Open Society Fund–Bosnia and Herzegovina launches the “Model for System Change in Secondary Education,” which supports education reform in Tuzla canton. A nongovernmental organization created by the Fund, the Center for Education Initiatives Step by Step program, in cooperation with UNICEF, begins a three-year “Child Friendly Schools” initiative, the first postwar teacher training project to engage all entities in cooperative, school-based reform.

2002

- Facilitated by the OSCE, a framework for education reform is developed and agreed to by all ministries of education. The “pillars” of the framework are: non-discriminatory access to schooling; modernization of curriculum in primary and secondary schools; a broad-based, flexible, vocational education and training system responsive to market requirements; higher quality and better access to higher education that is well-integrated with European structures; better use of public resources in education; and education legislation that is based on standards elsewhere in Europe and on norms grounded in international human rights conventions.

2003

- Framework law for primary and secondary education adopted, laying the basis for comprehensive reform of education at the state level.
- An EU project results in a white paper for modernization of primary and secondary education that is adopted by the educational ministries.
- Cantonal ministries begin to align their laws with the framework law in order to ensure that the education reform is systemic and synchronized across the country.
- Law on rights protection for national minorities adopted, providing for inclusive education.

2004

- National action plan on the education needs of Roma and other national minorities adopted. The plan aims to improve the access of Roma to the mainstream education system.
- Framework law on higher education awaits adoption by Parliament to provide a basis for changes in universities.

Bulgaria

1991

- A National Education Act is passed, providing a framework for the structure, functions, and management of a public education system comprising kindergartens, schools, and servicing units. Stipulates that public education should provide education in compliance with the state’s educational standards.

1995

- Higher Education Act passed, granting academic autonomy to the universities.

1998

- An amendment to the framework law is passed on compulsory state educational standards for curriculum, syllabi, preschool, assessment, and teachers' qualifications. These standards form the basis for school curricula and subjects.
- The first pilot projects promoting the introduction of Romani teaching assistants are implemented.

1999

- General Education Curriculum Act passed, defining the compulsory end-of-secondary school matura exam. The first matura exam is to be taken in 2002.
- A Framework Program for Equal Integration of Roma in the Bulgarian Society is adopted as an outcome of dialogue between the Romani community and the government. The program defines the basic principles of a state strategy for ensuring equality of Roma in Bulgaria.

2000

- The Ministry of Education and Science begins introducing the new State Educational Standards grade by grade in general education curriculum and textbooks.
- Implementation of the Education Modernization Project launched with a World Bank loan of US\$65 million. An initial investment of US\$15 million includes support for implementing the new standards-based curriculum, the creation of student assessments and evaluation systems instruments, and improvement of resource management in general education by optimizing the school network and strengthening education management information.
- The Open Society Institute's Roma Participation Program supports a desegregation project in Vidin, the first such project aimed at enabling students from a segregated school for Roma to be integrated into mainstream schools. Project provides Romani children with transportation, clothes, textbooks, and additional preparation for learning.

2001

- Desegregation projects supported by OSI are extended to another five communities.
- OSI's Roma Special Schools' Initiative publishes research refuting the practice of placing Romani children into schools for the mentally handicapped. Ministry of Education and Science states its intention to use teachers from special schools as resource teachers in integrated school settings.
- Systematic introduction of Romani teaching assistants into the Bulgarian school system initiated with the PHARE-funded project Promoting the Integration of the Roma DG 9907.01. Fifty Romani teaching assistants are employed in primary schools to support the learning of Romani pupils.

2002

- The Open Society Foundation–Sofia initiates and finances a project to monitor and evaluate the activities and management of the World Bank–supported Education Modernization Project.
- The first pilot matura exam for 2001–2002 secondary school graduates is organized by the Ministry of Education and Science; around 50 percent of the scores in the Bulgarian language and mathematics are considered poor.

- The Committee for Clarity in Bulgarian Education, an NGO, wins a civil trial against the MoES, and the compulsory matura exam for 2002–2003 graduates is abolished.
- Amendment to legislation provides compulsory preparation classes, prior to first grade, for children whose mother tongue is a language other than Bulgarian. Aim is to enable students from minority populations to achieve higher learning outcomes upon entering primary school.

2003

- OSI and the World Bank propose a vast political initiative, the Decade of Roma Inclusion, 2005 to 2015. Bulgaria commits to the initiative. The Decade includes the creation of a Roma Education Fund to help close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma, including the desegregation of educational systems.
- Based on independent monitoring and evaluation evidence, the government and the World Bank decide to cancel the Education Modernization Project, due to lack of administrative capacity in the Ministry of Education and Science.

2004

- Introduction of the compulsory matura exam is postponed until 2006.

Croatia

1990

- Croatia becomes independent from Yugoslavia. Citizens anticipate the first democratic elections. Students and parents are frustrated by unsuccessful education reforms of Yugoslavia in the 1970s and 1980s.

1990–1991

- Popular rejection of the failed education reforms of the 1970s leads to calls for the return of the gymnasium, a grammar school with a longstanding tradition in Europe.
- Catholic religious education introduced in primary and high schools as an optional subject.

1993

- A gymnasium opens as the first private school in the country.

1991–1995

- In 1991 and 1992, war causes disruption or paralysis of schooling in parts of the country. Refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina are enrolled in local schools, and displaced persons from conflict-affected areas in Croatia move to new school communities.
- In 1995, large segments of the population from conflict-affected areas of Croatia leave as refugees. Many school buildings are deserted or destroyed.

1994–1997

- Government policy inclines toward conservatism and introduces pronationalist curricular content. The quality of textbooks declines. There is little teacher train-

ing. Financial resources are lacking, and management in education is highly centralized.

- Professional services (psychologists and special needs educators) are withdrawn from the vast majority of primary schools as a “savings in education” measure. Teachers and children are left without needed professional help in the vulnerable period of war, postconflict adjustment, and social transition.
- Nongovernmental organizations offer teacher training and materials, which are not supported by the government. Schools and individuals who cooperate with the NGO sector are increasingly under pressure and at risk.

1998

- Institute for School Development (as part of Ministry of Education and Sports) for the first time includes training for teachers organized by nongovernmental organizations in its Catalogue of Professional Training in Croatia.

1999

- Following end-of-year elections, there is a political shift in the government. New leadership espouses a prodemocracy platform.

2000

- Letter of Cooperation signed between the Open Society Institute–Croatia and the new government, creating a partnership on education reform and decentralization of public administration. This is a significant step not only for the orientation of the education sector but also for inclusion of the nongovernmental sector and education experts in the reform processes.
- Teacher training programs of the Forum for Freedom in Education (Reading and Writing for Critical Thinking, Street Law, Education for Health, and Step by Step program) are all endorsed through their inclusion in the Catalogue of Professional Training by the Institute for School Development. The programs reach thousands of teachers across the country.
- The position of Romani teaching assistant is introduced as one of the measures to increase integration of Roma.

2001

- The Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) is founded within the Institute for Social Research in Zagreb and launches four research projects, at the request of the government, to provide analyses that will inform education policymaking and system reform.

2003

- Education reform proposal made by the Ministry of Education and Sport is rejected by the Parliamentary Education Commission, due to lack of transparency in the process and scepticism among the public about the reforms.
- Croatia joins the Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015 initiative and launches a national program for Roma, with provisions for integration of Romani children to receive access to quality education. Desegregation proposals are the subject of intense public debate, lawsuits, and NGO activities.

2004

- Two separated ministries, the Ministry of Science and Technology and the Ministry of Education and Sport merge, uniting the oversight of primary, secondary, and higher education. Preschool education and the education of minorities figure more prominently under the new structure.
- The new Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, with the assistance of the World Bank and involvement of NGOs and independent experts, begins defining the scope and content of an Education Sector Support Program that will focus on improving the capacity of the education system to provide high-quality education for all.

Kosova

1991

- Following the dissolution of the Kosovo Parliament and takeover of responsibilities for education by authorities in Belgrade, the education system serving ethnic Albanians is declared illegal. Ethnic Albanian students and teachers are ordered out of school buildings.

1992

- The so-called parallel education system is established by ethnic Albanian Kosovars. Most of the new system's primary schools are allowed to continue their work in school buildings or in sections of schools where ethnic Serbian students are taught. Secondary schools are forced to operate in private houses or other makeshift premises.

1992–1995

- After major changes in curricula and textbooks, the local reality is two distinct education systems, one that reflects the interests and resistance of Kosova Albanians, and the other one supported by Belgrade. The two systems do not recognize each other.

1995–1998

- The Kosova Education Enrichment Program (KEEP) of the Soros foundation branch office in Prishtina is the first donor-funded education program in Kosova. In 1998, the first year of open conflict in Kosova, the program continues with the support of several international agencies and NGOs—despite security and communication constraints.

1999

- The year of destruction, massive deportations, massive refugee returns, and construction. Emergency projects get underway immediately after the end of the war and deployment of NATO troops.
- The Kosova Foundation for Open Society (KFOS) is established.
- The international authorities and donor agencies begin to invest resources in assessing the situation in order to prepare for longer term efforts in education.
- The United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) decides to rebuild the education system in Kosova, with the vision of a single, unified, nondiscriminatory, and inclusive education system. UNMIK increases cooperation with Kosovars through a con-

sultative process named DESK (Development of Education System in Kosovo), which attempts to assemble stakeholders from all major ethnic groups in Kosova.

2000

- A Transitional Administrative Department of Education and Science (TADES), with one international and one local director, is established and staffed.
- The Kosova Education Center, the first Kosova-wide and locally driven education NGO, is established by KFOS and funded by multiple donors.
- The DESK process is abandoned and replaced by the lead agency concept, which transfers the responsibility for development of specific segments of the education system to UNMIK-designated international organizations that implement donor-funded education projects.
- The entrance age to primary education is lowered from seven to six years.

2001

- The Constitutional Framework is promulgated, representing the basic legal act for Kosova under UN administration.
- A new education system is announced, consisting of five years of primary, four years of lower secondary, and three years of upper secondary schooling.
- The new General Curriculum Framework for primary and lower secondary education is developed, replacing the old, subject-by-subject approach.
- The first national elections take place.

2002

- The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MEST) is established.
- The Law of Primary and Secondary Education is promulgated, formalizing the new 5+4+3 years education system, and setting the basis for administrative reform in education.
- The ninth grade is introduced for the first time in September 2002, marking the beginning of implementation of the new legislation.
- The MEST establishes a number of working groups for curriculum changes.

2003

- The General Education Strategy is introduced, describing the ministry's priorities for the period 2003–2007.
- Significant investments in infrastructure are made by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology.
- The World Bank and the Soros foundation launch a three-year project to improve participation in education through school-based grants and training.

2004

- The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology announces plans to introduce a teacher licensing system which recognizes credits from in-service teacher training.
- The national higher education strategy and the national adult learning strategy are introduced. Both documents cover the period 2005–2015 and are results of a wide consultation process and involvement of relevant stakeholders.
- The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology is addressing intensively the issue of integration of minorities in the education system.
- Nation-wide elections bring to power a new government and a new minister of education.

Macedonia

1991

- Republic of Macedonia declares its independence from Yugoslavia.
- A constitution is passed in Parliament, providing a basis for the country's system of education. It also guarantees the rights of citizens to establish private educational institutions and grants autonomy to the university.
- Changes are made to legislation for secondary education; the most significant is the reinstitution of a previous tradition in general secondary education, known as "grammar school."

1994

- The first in-service training for teachers in child-centered methodology begins with the Step by Step program project of the Foundation Open Society Institute–Macedonia and Interactive Learning project of UNICEF. A month-long training for one hundred school principals in democratic school management is organized by the Foundation Open Society Institute–Macedonia.
- The University of Tetovo is established as a private initiative outside the legal framework of the Republic of Macedonia to provide the only Albanian-language higher education in the country.

1995

- As a reform to preservice teacher education, the two-year pedagogical academies are replaced with four-year preservice training for teachers in all faculties for teacher education. All official teacher training is conducted in the Macedonian language.

1996

- New curricula are implemented in primary education, according to the principles of democracy and respect for children's development characteristics and needs.

1997

- The international baccalaureate program is introduced in a secondary school in Skopje.
- The Center for Vocational Education and Training is opened, along with a national observatory for documenting and monitoring the education system.
- A law permitting the use of the Albanian language in the Pedagogical Faculty in Skopje is adopted by the Parliament. The law provokes student strikes supported by political parties opposing the law. The law remains in force.

1998

- Macedonia takes part in the Third International Mathematics and Science Study–Repeat (TIMSS-R), with support from the World Bank.
- An EU PHARE-sponsored reform of vocational education and training begins in twenty schools, for the piloting of curricula and teaching practice that respond to the needs of a democratic society and market-oriented economy.

1999

- A Rehabilitation of Education Project, supported by US\$5 million from the World Bank and a grant from the government of the Netherlands, is launched by the World Bank and the Ministry of Education and Science. The Project undertakes school rehabilitation, textbook development, and strengthening of educational as-

assessment and examinations. A unit for educational assessment is set up within the Bureau for Development of Education.

- Civic education is implemented as a compulsory subject in grades seven and eight, and as a cross-curricular activity in earlier grades. In general secondary schools, civic education is part of the compulsory subject sociology and an elective part of project activities. Civic education is compulsory in vocational schools.
- The Ministry of Education and Science introduces a concept of two or more textbooks for one syllabus in primary and secondary education. The teacher, working with parents, is responsible for choosing the most appropriate textbook, taking into consideration the needs of students and the school environment.
- The Center for Vocational Education and Training is closed. The National Observatory continues to work under the auspices of the Ministry of Education and Science.
- As a result of the Kosova crisis, an estimated 141,000 children and young people arrive from Kosova as refugees. Around 13,000 of them are either integrated into existing classes in local primary schools or placed in separate classes. Due to difficulties in fulfilling the lesson requirements in the schools where refugee children are placed, the school year in certain schools is extended by a month.

2000

- The First National Assessments of first-language competency (in Macedonian and Albanian) and math are conducted with students completing grade four. The standards for students' achievements in their native language and mathematic are established.

2001

- A new curriculum in grammar school education is introduced. The curriculum for primary education is established, in which the study of two foreign languages is compulsory, the first one to begin in fourth grade, and the second in sixth grade.
- At the initiative of the OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities, and with support from the international community, the South East Europe University at Tetovo is established as the first multilingual university in Macedonia, providing instruction in Albanian, Macedonian, and English.

2002

- A Creative Thinking and Learning Project is launched in forty-five primary and eighteen secondary schools in Macedonia, with the aim of developing a model for school-based reform. The project is cofinanced by USAID and the Foundation Open Society Institute–Macedonia.
- Through collaboration with the German Technical Agency, GTZ, a three-year reform of vocational education training is launched to develop curriculum and teaching methods for preparing students for the labor market.

2003

- The first National Assessment for Civic Education in grades four and six is conducted with support from Catholic Relief Services.
- Macedonia joins the initiative of the Open Society Institute and World Bank for a Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015), along with eight other countries.

- Amendments to legislation on higher education are adopted, paving the way for legalization of the University of Tetovo in Mala Rečica as the third state university in the country.

2004

- The Ministry of Education and Science prepares a Strategy for Decentralization in Education. Amendments to the legislation on primary and secondary education are passed in Parliament. The primary education law now stipulates that compulsory education will be nine years, instead of eight. During the first three years of primary school, student learning is to be assessed using a descriptive report instead of the previous marking system. The law on secondary education defines exams in all types of secondary education.
- The Modernization of Education Project, developed by the World Bank, mobilizes investment of US\$20 million (US\$5 million loan from the World Bank, EU10 million in grant from the Netherlands, and US\$3 million government contribution). The project is signed by the World Bank and the Ministry of Education and Science with components aimed at improving educational quality and participation, capacity building for decentralized education, and project management, monitoring, and evaluation.
- The process of creating a National Program for Development of Education, 2005–2015 begins, with final versions of the program and action plans for its implementation scheduled for debate in the Parliament in mid-2005.
- The Concept for Matura and Final Exams is approved by the Ministry of Education and Science and wider government.
- In conjunction with the Roma Decade initiative, the government establishes working groups to develop action plans in education, health, employment, and housing.
- Foundation Open Society Institute–Macedonia, in partnership with five other local NGOs, launches implementation of a three-year Roma Education Program, supported with financing from USAID, OSCE, and the Pestalozzi Children's Foundation. The program helps Romani students remain in the school system and succeed in learning, especially at transition points when they are most vulnerable to dropping out.

Moldova

1991

- Declaration of Independence of the Republic of Moldova from the former Soviet Union. Popular resurgence of interest in reviving Romanian language and culture, following decades of dominance of the Russian language in Moldovan society.

1992

- Armed conflict between the new state of Moldova and the self-proclaimed separatist Transnistria region results in casualties and more than 30,000 refugees and displaced persons. General schools in the Transnistria region are compelled to use the curricular materials and textbooks from the Soviet era and become isolated from benefits of reform to be undertaken in the rest of Moldova. Schools that re-

sist the restrictions, or that aim to use Romanian language instruction based on the Latin script and not the Cyrillic alphabet are subject to persecution and threats.

- Soros Foundation–Moldova is founded, with education stated as one of its priorities.

1994

- The first free national elections are held.
- The Concept of Development of Education in the Republic of Moldova is adopted by the Parliament.
- The introduction of a new, alternative child-centered teaching methodology is initiated by the Soros Foundation–Moldova through the Step by Step program.

1995

- The Law of Education is adopted by the Parliament in July 1995.
- The National Program of Development of Education for 1995–2005 is approved. The National Curriculum for Primary Education (first edition) is adopted and published, marking the first qualitative attempt to make the shift from content-based teaching to objectives-based, learner-centered instruction.
- First national open competition for publishing of teaching materials organized in a cooperative initiative between the Ministry of Education and Soros Foundation–Moldova.

1996

- The World Bank (WB) develops a country assistance strategy in education, targeting curriculum development, textbook development, evaluation and assessment, and teacher training for primary and secondary education (grades one to nine).
- Soros Foundation–Moldova launches a major initiative to support secondary education. With a focus on upper secondary level schooling, the Modernization of Humanities Education Program covers curriculum development, teaching materials, teacher training, and educational management.

1997

- The Government and the World Bank launch the Education Reform Project, under which the National Council for Curriculum and Evaluation is established. The first regulatory documents and reference guides for curriculum development are published.

1998

- A National Curriculum for Primary Education is published and adopted.
- The Law on Administrative and Territorial Reform restructures Moldova's forty decentralized administrative entities into twelve new administrative units. Each of the new units includes a department for education.
- The New Subject Curricula for Gymnasium (Lower Secondary) Education is published and adopted.

1999

- A cooperation agreement to support reform is signed between the Ministry of Education, Soros Foundation–Moldova, and three newly created education NGOs established by the Soros Foundation–Moldova.
- A new generation of textbooks begins to emerge under the framework of the World Bank–supported education project, which shows results in the capacity development of local authors and publishers.

- Subject Curricula for Lyceum (upper secondary) Education are published and adopted.
- The Social Investment Fund of Moldova (SIF), with the support of the World Bank, is established to help development in rural areas through community-based projects. Many communities devise projects for rehabilitation of schools or kindergartens.

2000

- The High Commissioner for National Minorities of OSCE (The Hague, Netherlands), initiates a substantial four-year project in support of minority schools, in order to improve the level of teaching and learning of the state language by minority students. By 2004, teachers of Romanian from all minority schools have benefited from high-quality training programs in learner-centered, interactive methodology.

2001

- The Communist Party is returned to power by voters, and a Communist Party leader is elected as president.
- Political changes have repercussions for education reform. Many key experts within the reform process are replaced, sidelined or otherwise ousted. Reform implementation bodies, such as the National Council for Curriculum and Evaluation, are reduced to functioning primarily “on paper.”

2002

- An “administrative-territorial antireform,” as defined by local experts, is developed and implemented by the government, effectively reinstating the more centralized Soviet system of administration. Reorganization of regional departments of education fragments local capacities created through the Educational Reform Project and other initiatives.
- A controversial draft project of federalization of the country is presented to the government and the separatist Transnistria leaders by mediators from the OSCE, Russia, and Ukraine. Democratic opposition reacts.
- The Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) passes a resolution that requires state institutions in Moldova to respect basic human rights. PACE criticizes the attempts of the government to suppress democratic opposition, to re-introduce Russian language as an official language and mandatory course in schools, and to manipulate the school curriculum for political purposes.

2003

- Massive emigration has a significant impact on economic, political, and social life. As estimated by independent bodies, by 2003, nearly one million Moldovans, or around half the country’s workforce and electorate have migrated to other countries in search of a better life for themselves and, in many cases, for families they leave behind.
- In the Transnistria region, the situation of Romanian language schools worsens. Teachers and parents are persecuted for enabling children to study in these schools.

2004

- The Ministry of Education develops a new strategy for the teacher training system, though no decision has been taken.

- School buildings in about 190 communities have been rehabilitated through the World Bank–supported Social Investment Fund. An estimated 485 classes of students and their teachers have benefited from training in the Step by Step teacher training methodology. Parent-teacher associations created through the project are taking more and more responsibility for raising and addressing educational and community problems.
- The government emphasizes work on the National Strategy for Poverty Reduction and Economic Growth, which international agencies have requested must be handled with a participatory approach. Despite much criticism and opposition from education specialists, the government approves the section on education.
- The Education Reform Project closes. At a final conference, quantitative results are presented. Project goals considered “delivered” are the development of the national curriculum; implementation on a larger scale of new content of instruction and of interactive, learner-centered educational approaches; and introduction of unique criteria of student evaluation and assessment. The majority of program objectives are still unattained, however, in the areas of decentralization and diversification of the teacher training system, elaboration and application of national educational standards, development of a functional, diversified system of financing in education, and assurance of quality of education for all.
- The World Bank announces its intention to work with the government on a new project for development of education in rural areas.
- Based on official data in 2004, it is estimated that more than 24,000 children in Moldova are left without any parental care, due to parents working abroad. No data are available on children with only one parent abroad. Analysts identify these children as a distinct and growing new group with urgent, special needs for educational and psychosocial assistance.

Montenegro

1992–1996

- Serbia and Montenegro become subject to economic, educational, sports, and cultural sanctions by the UN Security Council. Isolation, coupled with hyperinflation and a devastated economic system, has severe effects on the functioning of the education system in Montenegro. (Sanctions were completely lifted only in 2001.)
- Thousands of refugees arrive in Montenegro to find shelter from war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. At one point, the number of refugees in Montenegro is estimated at 20 percent of the total population.

1994

- Several long-lasting, in-service teacher education projects are launched, the largest being the Soros-financed Step by Step Program and UNICEF’s Active Learning Project. In English language training, the introduction of textbooks published in the UK and teacher training by the British Council for local English teachers are also pathbreaking. Along with UNICEF, the Save the Children Fund also starts its activities related to the psychosocial support for children in need and the training of teachers for inclusive education.

1999

- The Kosovo crisis and the NATO bombing campaign in Serbia and Montenegro bring a new wave of displaced people to Montenegro, including a significant number of Roma. The integration of Romani children into the school system becomes one of the most difficult challenges for the education system.
- UNICEF initiates a program of training teachers to implement inclusive education in preschool and primary schools.
- Catholic Relief Services launches an effort to establish school parental councils, as well as projects related to youth policy and school connectivity.
- The Open Society Institute–Montenegro and the Ministry of Education and Science launch a comprehensive program for systemic change of the education system in Montenegro.

2000

- Seminars on education reform are organized by Open Society Institute–Montenegro for representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science, School Inspectorate, University of Montenegro, and other leaders in education.
- A National Council for Education Reform is established; the council consists of commissions to develop the concept of the new educational system and draft new education legislation.
- Open Society Institute–Montenegro organizes capacity building seminars for the reform commissions, Ministry of Education and Science, and representatives of educational institutions.
- A year-long EU-funded Obnova Project is launched to advance efforts in teacher training, curriculum development, quality assurance, and information technology in education.

2001

- Intensive activity toward articulating a new vision for education with support from external consultants. Public and professional debates organized to discuss a draft document entitled the Book of Changes. Drafting of the new educational legislation proceeds in parallel.
- Parliament adopts the Book of Changes as the key policy document for education reform. In pre-university education, it proposes the extension of compulsory education to nine years, introduction of optional subjects and an open, flexible curriculum, and establishment of a system of external examination and assessment.

2002

- General strike of teachers commences and lasts for seven months. The length of school lessons is reduced to twenty-five minutes throughout the duration of the strike. The strike ends without significant outcomes for teachers in terms of improved conditions of service. Education reform activities continue in the shadow of the teachers' strike.
- A National Council for Curriculum Revision and Commissions for preschool, primary, general secondary, vocational, and adult education is established, with support from the Foundation Open Society Institute–Representative Office Montenegro (FOSI–ROM)

- Dialogue begins between the Ministry of Education and Science and the World Bank about the possibility of World Bank engagement in education in Montenegro.
- Department for Textbook Publishing and Teaching Aids accelerates its capacity/institution building, with the support of FOSI-ROM, in order to be able to produce a large number of new textbooks upon completion of curriculum revision.
- New history textbooks for primary and secondary schools are published, featuring revised presentation of content. Materials, freed from ideology, have a more balanced approach to contemporary history in the Balkans than previous texts.
- An eighteen-month EU-funded project for reform of vocational education is launched.
- Parliament adopts five laws for particular educational levels, as well as a framework law on education, reflecting the vision set out in the Book for Changes.

2003

- The National Council for Curriculum Revision adopts “Guidelines for Curriculum Revision” and establishes commissions to revise subject curricula.
- The Council for General Education and the Council for Vocational and Adult Education are made responsible for adopting the new curricula.
- The Bureau for Educational Services is established to deal with issues of educational quality assurance, in-service teacher training, research, and policy development. It is to play a major role in implementation of the education reform.
- International institutions and donors mobilize to support the education reform. High-profile donor meetings held in Brussels, Belgrade, and Podgorica.
- UNDP, FOSI-ROM, and the government of Montenegro launch the Capacity Development Program aimed at supporting reform of public administration. The Ministry of Education and Science and the Bureau for Education Services are selected as beneficiaries to be supported in public information/external relations, information technology, and quality assurance.
- Montenegro commits to join the initiative of the Open Society Institute and World Bank, Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015), along with eight other countries.
- Textbook publishing reforms continue.
- A public information/transparency campaign is launched, with support from FOSI-ROM, to ensure that stakeholders in education reform are kept informed.

2004

- New curricula for primary and secondary education adopted by the Council for General Education.
- Draft law on education of children with special needs, proposing greater social inclusion, is presented for public discussion.
- Bureau for Educational Services prepares reform implementation programs.
- Arrangements made for Montenegro to participate in the OECD PISA project in 2006.
- Roma Education Initiative launched as a first step in creation of a new comprehensive policy related to the education of Romani children. The project is a partnership of the Ministry of Education and Science, FOSI-ROM, and UNICEF.

- Technical preparation of the first World Bank loan to education in Montenegro is underway, with a loan anticipated to be made in 2005.
- Comprehensive change is implemented in 21 (out of a total of 156) primary schools, with the aim of reaching all primary and secondary schools in Montenegro by 2010.

Romania

1989

- Dramatic political change takes place following large popular movements against the communist regime.
- Communist dictatorship is abolished: a multiparty system, the separation of powers, and the rule of law are proclaimed as basic principles for a new democratic Romania.
- The Front of National Salvation is created, including former political opponents, independent personalities, leaders of opinion, but also members of the old regime.

1990

- The first multiparty elections are held.
- A former communist leader who opposed dictatorship is elected as president; the Front of National Salvation has the majority in the Parliament and creates the Government.
- Education is proclaimed a politics-free social sector, and steps are undertaken to free curricula and textbooks from ideology and to introduce optional subjects.
- The Ministry of Education reduces the school week from six days to five; competitive recruitment of teaching positions in large cities is introduced; the compulsory assignment of teachers to rural areas is abolished.
- The Institute of Educational Sciences and the social sciences departments of universities are reopened (they had been closed in the early 1980s).
- Soros Foundation for an Open Society is established with a commitment to support the development of an open society through changes in education.

1991

- Public debates about education reform and advocacy by researchers of the Institute of Educational Sciences and opinion leaders become more vocal and visible.
- The first coherent education reform proposals are published by the Institute.
- The first exploratory mission of the World Bank visits Romania to explore a possible project.

1992

- The World Bank starts preparation of an Education Reform Project.
- Institute of Educational Sciences carries out analyses to identify dysfunctions in the current education system and needed reforms.

1993–1994

- Drafts of new curricula issued for grades one to eight; new subjects introduced in the curricula (civics, human rights).
- Preparation of the Education Reform Project with World Bank advice continues.

- The first White Paper concerning education reform in Romania is published by the Institute.

1995

- Formal launch of the Education Reform Project, cofinanced by the government and the World Bank. Reforms envisaged in curriculum, textbooks, evaluation and assessment, management, teacher training, and preparation of occupational standards.
- Independent national boards are created to manage different reform strands, including curriculum and teacher training, assessment and examination, management, textbooks and occupational standards.
- The first textbook competition is organized for alternative (parallel) primary school textbooks in an initiative independent from the Education Reform Project.
- A new education law is passed. Based on a new educational philosophy, the law promotes a new structure and functioning of the system, legalizes private education, and promotes democratic school management and community involvement.
- Reform process starts in the framework of the Education Reform Project.
- An EU PHARE–financed Vocational Education and Training Project is launched in pilot schools throughout the country.

1996–1997

- Additional competitions for alternative (parallel) textbooks get underway through the Education Reform Project.
- A shift in political power through elections with the former opposition (a coalition of Christian-Democrats, Liberals, Democrats, and Minorities) coming to power after fifty years of communist/leftist rule.
- The Ministry of Education cannot ensure a systemic implementation of the reform process and a series of drawbacks and pitfalls undermine change.

1997

- A new minister of education is appointed and declares his intention to accelerate the reform process.

1998–2000

- A coherent education reform is conceived in terms of educational policy, strategy, and implementation steps. Subsector reforms are encouraged and intersectoral correlations are assured.
- Amendments to the education law introduce nine years of compulsory education and the new concept of a national curriculum.
- A New National Curriculum Framework is issued, with a 70 percent central core curriculum and 30 percent flexible, school-based curriculum. New syllabi published for grades one to twelve.
- National Assessment and Examination Service created.
- Grades one to eight reform supported by the new parallel, alternative textbooks.
- A new exam is introduced at the end of grade eight, and the secondary school-graduating matura exam is reshaped.
- A new teacher training system is set up and school management improves.
- Romany Language Departments are opened in the main universities; places for Romani candidates are reserved in the Social Assistance Departments.

1999–2000

- The textbook market for upper secondary school is liberalized, and an open textbook market begins to function.
- Long-distance training courses are offered for unqualified Romani teachers.
- The Centre Education 2000+, a spin-off of the Open Society Foundation–Romania, initiates programs for Romani education and launches the Education Development Program (Megaproject) that, from 1999 to 2002, implements a brand new “grassroots” reform process in Romania.
- A National Center for Teachers and School Managers Training is created, encouraging multiple service providers to enter the education and training market.
- Romania is considered one of the best examples of education reform in South East Europe.
- Closure of the negotiation chapter on education in the framework of Romania’s Accession to the European Union.

2001–2003

- After the election is won by the Social Democratic Party, a new minister of education declares he disagrees with all reform steps undertaken in the previous four years.
- The Education Reform Project closes in 2001, having achieved most of its stated objectives. However, the National Curriculum is recentralized, and the school-based curriculum disappears. The president of the National Board for Curriculum resigns. The open textbook market is profoundly affected. Teachers’ guidelines originally published to foster teachers’ understanding of the new curriculum are barred from being disseminated in schools.
- The assessment and examination system is changed. Instead of a matura conceived on a “competence based” assessment, standardized tests are introduced for specific subjects.
- In-service training of teachers is reorganized; a new set of centralized and rigid regulations is issued, effectively excluding nonstate training providers from the market. The national system of in-service training of teachers is all but stopped.
- The World Bank and the ministry prepare a second operation in education, the Rural Education Project, aimed at addressing the problems of education provision, access and equal chances for students in rural areas.
- Nongovernmental organizations are explicitly discouraged in their activities in education. Center Education 2000+ begins lobbying for education reform and building up a critical voice on current developments in Romanian education.
- To support the implementation of strategy regarding the improvement of access to education for disadvantaged groups with a special focus on Roma, Roma School Mediators are introduced in seventy-six pilot schools from ten counties, by appointment of the county-level school inspectorates.
- In 2002, the Megaproject is closed, having affected the education system through grassroots implementation approaches and the launching of numerous donor-supported initiatives.
- The Education Bill is again amended to introduce compulsory education of ten years, with little preparation for its introduction in the upcoming school year.

2003–2004

- A new minister of education is appointed. Contradictory decisions are taken due to the critical situation left by the former minister. How to implement ten-year compulsory education becomes a major issue.
- The institutions created during the 1990s function without leadership or under provisional arrangements.
- New syllabi for grade nine are published in 2004 under short deadlines, sparking protests from NGOs and stakeholders that are largely ignored by the Ministry of Education.
- General elections take place and maintain the current leadership in power, as Romania heads toward accession to the EU, scheduled for 2007.

Serbia

1990–1995

- A time of war policies, intense conflicts, massive exodus of the young and educated people, arrival of hundreds of thousands of refugees, imposed UN sanctions, and a rapid pauperization of the country. The education system is devastated. At the same time, the first expert educational organizations begin to appear, to mitigate some of the harm to education and to work toward raising its quality.

1991

- Civic resistance grows in response to the regime of Slobodan Milošević and its policy of war. Antiwar demonstrations draw large crowds of students and professors. Young people are recruited for the wars in Croatia and, later on, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some 150,000 young, educated people leave Serbia in the first wave of emigration.

1992

- The international community imposes UN Sanctions that propel the country into isolation from international global political, economic, cultural, sports, and scientific activities. Serbia's contact with educational and scientific organizations is radically curtailed.

1993

- Hyperinflation takes off, resulting in a shortage of food products and endless queues at shops. An estimated 800,000 registered and nonregistered refugees from Croatia and Bosnia are living in Serbia; 300,000 young people leave the country.
- School buildings are old and become ever more dilapidated. The teaching profession is degraded, and many teachers leave schools and universities in search of more lucrative professions. The Ministry of Education and Sports formulates policies behind closed doors and promotes rigid, ideological programs and methodology. The formal system of professional development of teachers collapses.
- Several education NGOs are established as a response to the crisis in education.
- An alternative education scene emerges. The Belgrade Open School becomes the first alternative higher education organization, offering modern, interdisciplinary undergraduate programs to talented students.

1994

- The Step by Step Preschool Project is one of the first significant attempts to introduce interactive teaching methodology, social inclusion, and child-centered approaches into the educational system. Authorities attempt to disrupt the project.

1995

- UNICEF psychosocial assistance to children and programs of nonviolent communication, as well as the Active Learning Project, are the most significant education and teacher training programs running in schools. After many years, school teachers finally have a chance for quality professional development.

1996–1997

- A time of intense preparations by the education expert community and independent circles for democratic change and education reform. “Setting the stage” for education reform begins during this period.
- General civic and student protests against the regime increase. Schools and universities work irregularly, and teachers’ trade unions begin to strike. The time children spend at school is dramatically reduced.
- Fund for an Open Society–Yugoslavia (FOS) and the Petnica Science Center start the first significant computerization of high schools through a project entitled “Third Millennium.” Computerization is supported by teacher training on using the computer technology and Internet as teaching tools.
- In cooperation with Roma NGOs, FOS initiates the first significant act of inclusion of Romani children in preschool education through the Step by Step Roma Preschool Program. This initiative results in a comprehensive education model, Compensatory Roma Education, together with an antibias program for teachers and school leaders.

1998

- In response to the students’ and professors’ opposition, the regime adopts a new law on universities, which abolishes the autonomy of the university. More than 200 university professors leave their positions or are discharged. With the support of FOS, the Alternative Academic Education Network is founded. It offers modern, interdisciplinary graduate programs as a model of education in direct contradiction with the official university system under the regime.

1999

- NATO alliance starts a bombing campaign of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as a result of the Milošević regime’s policy in the Kosovo conflict. Around 200,000 mostly ethnic Serbian and Romani refugees arrive in Serbia. As a result of the bombardment, 320 school buildings are damaged, thirty students and teachers are killed, and there is almost no educational instruction in schools for more than three months.

2000

- FOS supports the education policy expert group, Education Forum, to analyze the status, capacities, and basic needs of the education system. The Forum organizes open discussions among experts on the direction of educational development and offers a concept for education reform.

- Following elections in the autumn, there are massive demonstrations to pressure Milošević to recognize election results. At last, the government changes, opening the way for modernization and democratization.
- 2001
- Democratic changes lead to a government announcement of a comprehensive education reform based on the principles of access for all, decentralization, professionalization, and autonomy of educational institutions. Policy development gets underway.
 - More than 20,000 teachers, parents, young people, and other stakeholders participate in discussions about the reform. A basic strategy for education change is defined as “Quality Education for All.” The new strategy is promoted at a large International Donor Conference, at which Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić gives unambiguous political support to the new educational policy.
- 2002
- The education strategy becomes operational. More than 300 teachers and university professors participate in curriculum design. Conservative parts of the universities and teachers’ trade unions, together with the most conservative part of the Serbian Orthodox Church raise opposition to the education reforms. As a compromise and in an attempt to protect other new education policies, the Ministry of Education introduces religious education in schools.
 - A Law on Protection of National Minorities is passed, recognizing for the first time the Roma as a national minority. The Office for Roma Issues begins working within the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights.
- 2003
- A framework law on the education system is passed in the Parliament, providing for the institutionalization of the education reform and systemic changes in finance and management, quality assurance, curricula, textbooks, and professional advancement of teachers. Opposition to the reforms is growing. Members of the Serbian Orthodox Church are printing books and leaflets criticizing the reform steps undertaken.
 - A National Strategy for Improvement of Education of the Roma is created through the FOSS (now the Fund for an Open Society–Serbia) Project called Equal Chances - Integration of Roma Children and Youth in the Education System. The Project engages local communities to create strategies of improving access to the education system for Romani children and youth.
 - New curriculum is introduced in the first grade of primary school. Thousands of teachers are trained. Three out of seven institutions envisaged under the new education legislation are established and become operational—Center for Evaluation, Center for Accreditation of the Teacher Training Programs, and Center for the Development of Curricula and Textbooks.
 - Prime Minister Zoran Djindjić, who became a symbol of change and modernization of Serbia, is assassinated, an event that is virtually certain to jeopardize reforms.
 - Serbia commits to join the initiative of the Open Society Institute and World Bank Decade of Roma Inclusion (2005–2015), along with eight other countries.

2004

- The “white book” of general education reform entitled *Quality Education for All-Challenges of the Education Reform in Serbia* is published.
- The anticipated change of government in the spring brings politicization, centralization, elitism, and abandonment of the principle of access to quality education for all. The Parliament adopts amendments to the education law, prepared by the new Ministry of Education and Sports that restore a “teacher-centered” concept of education, based on rigid school programs, closed and insensitive to diversity and special needs. Professional development of teachers is suspended. The minister’s obstinacy escalates in a decision to exclude the theory of evolution from the school program. The minister’s move is covered extensively by local and international media.
- Reactions are fierce in opposition to the Ministry of Education and Sports by the professional public, the civil sector active in education, the more progressive teachers’ associations, donors, and the media. Education Reform Circle, an NGO and education experts alliance, is founded with the goal to support a modern system of education and advocate for openness, evidence-based decisions, effectiveness and efficiency. Under pressure, the minister of education resigns.
- A new minister assumes office and, almost immediately, negates the most controversial decisions of the previous minister. Some hope is restored for the future of education reform.

Slovenia

1990

- First democratic elections are held.
- The gymnasium education model is reintroduced, effectively abandoning the education reforms in Yugoslavia during the 1970s and 1980s.
- There is a referendum on the independence of Slovenia.

1991

- Slovenia declares independence in late spring.
- Students strike against the introduction of a compulsory final examination at the end of secondary school.
- A ten-day war ends in mid-summer. The Yugoslav Army withdraws in the autumn.
- Refugees from Croatia begin arriving in Slovenia.

1992

- Slovenia becomes a member of the United Nations.
- Refugees arriving from Bosnia total around 70,000. Fifty-four special primary schools for refugees are established and serve approximately 9,000 children.
- A new minister of education and sport is appointed and apparently intends to initiate a major education reform.
- Intensive preparations begin for introducing the external matura exam, and a First National Matura Commission is appointed.

- The international baccalaureate program is introduced at two secondary schools, in Maribor and Ljubljana.
- 1993
- Preparations of a white paper for education reform are underway, intended as the basis for reform-oriented education legislation.
 - The “catalogues of knowledge” (syllabi) for the matura exam are adopted.
 - Leadership is changed at the National Education Institute, the country’s central developmental and counselling education institution.
 - A National Examination Center is founded.
 - Legislation is prepared on higher education, designating the matura exam as a condition for university entrance.
- 1994
- Legislation prepared for large-scale reform of pre-university education.
 - A trial matura exam is carried out at twenty-six secondary schools.
 - The Act Providing Funds for the Developmental Education Programs is adopted, enabling investments of around EU188 million for the period 1994–2001.
- 1995
- The first external matura exam is carried out, and 91.2 percent of students pass.
 - Parliamentary debate begins on the adoption of the framework education legislation.
 - The Center for Vocational Education and Leadership School is founded.
 - The National Education Institute ceases being an integral part of the Ministry of Education and Sport and becomes a public institute.
- 1996
- Framework legislation is adopted for pre-university education.
 - The Councils for General Education, Vocational Education, and Adult Education are set up and all begin to operate under the new framework.
 - Curriculum renewal is launched for pre-university education, and a National Curriculum Council is nominated.
- 1997
- New programs and curricula are prepared at a rapid pace. Curricula are reviewed through extensive consultations by more than 80 percent of teachers and other professionals in education and subject disciplines.
 - Negotiations begin on accession of Slovenia to the EU, including discussions on education.
- 1998
- New curricula are adopted.
 - Slovenia is included in the Socrates, Leonardo da Vinci, and Youth for Europe programs of the EU.
- 1999
- A new minister of education is named and apparently intends to continue the reforms in progress.
 - The new nine-year compulsory education is introduced on a trial basis in forty-two schools.
 - The National Evaluation Council is made responsible for the evaluation of pre-university education.

- Amendments to higher education legislation enable graduates from technical secondary schools to register for university studies under specified conditions.
- 2000
- The Placement of Children with Special Need Act and Music School Act are adopted.
 - There is another change of leadership at the National Education Institute.
 - Introduction of the nine-year school program continues.
- 2001
- The first vocational schooling matura is carried out.
- 2002
- A new minister of education and sport is appointed with a governmental change. It is the same person who initiated the reforms in the early 1990s. Thus, leadership of the long-term reform process is sustained.
 - The Act on Basic Developmental Education and Science Programs is adopted, allocating EU700 million until 2008.
- 2003
- The nine-year school program is extended to all schools.
 - Legislation regulating the general and vocational matura is adopted.
 - Programs for children with special needs are adopted.
- 2004
- National Strategy on the Integration of Roma Children in Education is approved.
 - Slovenia becomes a member of the EU and gains full access to European education programs.

For Further Reference

This section provides a selection of websites on which readers can find additional descriptions and analyses of education systems in South East Europe.

Regional

South East Europe – Education Cooperation Network (SEE-ECN)
<http://www.see-educoop.net>

OECD Thematic Reviews of National Policies for Education in SEE
http://www.see-educoop.net/education_in/pdf/oecd.htm

Human Development Report 2004
<http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data>

Roma Education Initiative
<http://www.osi.hu/esp/rei>

EuroEducation.net
<http://www.euroeducation.net>

Albania

Ministry of Education and Science of Albania
<http://www.mash.gov.al>

National Institute of Statistics (INSTAT)
<http://www.instat.gov.al>

Open Society Foundation for Albania (OSFA)
<http://www.soros.al/aedp/index.html>

Center for Democratic Education (CDE)
<http://www.cde-ct.org>

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Office for Security and Cooperation in BiH
<http://www.oscebih.org/education>

Federal Ministry of Education and Science, the Federation of BiH
<http://www.fmon.gov.ba>

Ministry of Education and Culture, the Republic of Srpska
<http://www.vladars.net/en/min/mp.html>

Council of Ministers, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Economic Relations
Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
<http://www.bih.prsp.info>

Open Society Fund–Bosnia and Herzegovina
<http://www.soros.org.ba>

Bulgaria

National Statistical Institute–Bulgaria
<http://www.nsi.bg>

Open Society Institute–Sofia
<http://osi.bg>

Paideia Educational Foundation
<http://www.paideafoundation.org>

Croatia

Institute for Social Research Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD)
<http://www.idi.hr/cerd/en/index.htm>

Ministry of Education and Sports Croatia
<http://www.mzos.hr/default.asp>

Republic of Croatia–Central Bureau of Statistics
<http://www.dzs.hr/defaulte.htm>

Kosova

Kosova Education Center
<http://www.kec-ks.org>

Ministry of Education, Science and Technology
<http://www.mashtgov.net>

Statistical Office of Kosovo
<http://www.sok-kosovo.org>

Macedonia

National Program For Development of Education
<http://www.npro.edu.mk/english/index-en.htm>

Republic of Macedonia State Statistical Office
<http://www.stat.gov.mk>

Foundation Open Society Institute–Macedonia
<http://www.soros.org.mk>

University “St. Kiril i Metodij”
<http://www.ukim.edu.mk>

Moldova

Institute for Public Policy
<http://www.ipp.md>

Educational Center Pro Didactica
<http://www.prodidactica.md>

Montenegro

Ministry of Education and Science
<http://www.mpin.vlada.cg.yu>

Bureau for Educational Services of the Republic of Montenegro
<http://www.zavodzaskolstvo.org>

Foundation Open Society Institute–Representative Office Montenegro
<http://www.osim.cg.yu>

Romania

Center Education 2000+
<http://www.cedu.ro>

Institute of Educational Sciences
<http://www.ise.ro>

Ministry of National Education Romania
<http://www.edu.ro/engl.htm>

Serbia

Fund for an Open Society–Serbia
<http://www.fosserbia.org>

Ministry of Education and Sports, Government of the Republic of Serbia
<http://www.mps.sr.gov.yu>

Reform Education Circles (ROK)
<http://www.reformaobrazovanja.org>

Slovenia

Ministry of Education, Science and Sports, Republic of Slovenia
<http://www.mszs.si/eng>

National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia
<http://www.zrss.si>

Center of the Republic of Slovenia for Vocational Education and Training
<http://www.cpi.si>

"My colleagues and I spent a lot time travelling with out laptops, meeting officials, and visiting schools. We wrote long, dry technical reports to raise issues, reconcile the reality we saw with the data we received, and map out plans for reform. One cynical host described us as outsiders who 'borrow your watch to tell you the time.' But when we departed for the airports after our visits, the advice left behind mattered. It was factored into education budgets, new laws, and the catch-all process known as capacity-building. After a year or two, the words in our reports were backed up with funds in the form of loans delivered to the government. We focused on moving resources and changing others. We didn't often stop to consider, let alone write down, how working in the region shaped and reshaped us."

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